

Far From Perfection 2: The Price of Perfection

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Summary: Three years on, everything seems perfect. However, the price of holding onto their perfect lives soon becomes clear when good becomes bad, and bad becomes worse. How will our favourite characters deal with all new challenges that surround everyone's lives?

Pairings: Zane/Rikki, Cleo/Lewis, Will/Bella.

1. Flash Forward

****Welcome to a brand new Far From Perfection! ****

****We start off three years after the final chapter of the original story and we start off in a different state too. Sydney is personally one of my favourite cities in the world and I was inspired to start it off there as something a little bit different since I was there at the time of writing. Plus, I thought it was an awesome way to incorporate a whole heap of group scenes!****

****Enjoy this new beginning and I'll love you forever if you let me know what you thought of it!****

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<p>Chapter One â€" Flash Forward:

35,000 feet above the ground,

>Newcastle, ****New South Wales****

The difference that three years can make on six individuals lives is truly quite an incredible thing.

Just like a seat in a plane, as ascending from the safe familiarity of ground can give a whole new and fresh perspective on landscapes, locations and sceneries that one may know like the back of their hand, looking at lives with a view to the past as you compare point A in your life with that of point B can work as a true eye

opener.

That is just how the lives of these six individuals will be examined; from somewhere in the air, passing over and around Newcastle and between point A of the Gold Coast, Queensland and point B of Sydney, New South Wales. Similarly, a comparison of point A as twenty-one year olds, compared to the same lives of the people in point B as twenty-four year olds.

Lewis and Cleo McCartney had a stranger squashed in the third seat, located between the two of them on the plane. Lewis's fail with checking-in to the flight acted as a reminder, that although Cleo would permit his pride to be cushioned with taking the lead as the head of their two-piece family with performing normal duties, that sometimes he wasn't always up to it.

Although the seating had just been a simple mistake on Lewis's part during the online check-in of the flight, the principle applied to larger matters that he would step up to... as though he had never been affected by the Guillain-Barré Syndrome. Saying that, he had managed to fight hard against the disease to get his life back to a state of normality, three years on. While he was the old Lewis for the most part, the GBS had left some smaller scars on Lewis's abilities and it had had some minor repercussions.

No-one would ever choose to go through and endure the syndrome which Lewis had bore the brunt of, with his wife's support, but now it had been three years since the initial diagnosis and two years since he had been classified as in recovery. However, both halves of the couple would readily agree that even though they had spent more of their lives together than and that they had been through individual and shared problems for so long, the Guillain-Barré had proven to be their most relationship strengthening and self-improving hurdle that they had ever survived. Cleo and Lewis believe that they are better people for working through Lewis's illness, and if that hadn't, nothing could tear their marriage and love apart.

To the left of the married couple who had recently celebrated their 4th wedding anniversary sat Zane Bennett and Rikki Chadwick. This particular couple had discovered that when you mix dynamite with dynamite it can either create a spectacular, awe-inspiring firework display, or it can backfire in a catastrophic grenade.

Evidently, the couple have had their ups and downs over the years, experiencing times of radiant highs, along with the times of supreme lows. However, in spite of the couple's natural extremities within their relationship, at some point in time, Zane and Rikki had grown up.

... Apparently!

Jokes aside, Zane and Rikki had obviously done some amount of soul-searching and self-improvement since their eighteenth year of life, when their relationship had fallen apart the most recent time. They had beaten their personal records of lasting longer than they ever had lasted together before, and with anyone else either party dated before too. Suffice to say, in summary, the relationship affectionately nicknamed 'Zikki' had been on a good, slow, but solid boil for the last three years.

An additional relationship that Rikki had taken slowly and steadily (but not necessarily smoothly) was that of with her younger and previously unknown sister, Tam. The girls still had a long way to go, but they had come a ridiculously long way from the early days when Rikki didn't even want to have a bar of her younger and only sibling.

Behind the couple sat Will Benjamin and Bella Hartley with their daughter sitting in the middle seat and in between the two of them. The past few years, they have spent time discovering that the past does not have to define the future... As long as you are not the one to let it.

When in the early stages of normalizing and rebuilding her life three years ago, Bella had been more than reluctant towards Will, only extending herself as much as she needed to for the absolute minimum in the awkwardness they worked through for the sake of their daughter. However, their endurance and persistence with the uncomfortable situation had resulted fruitfully and things had been working out well.

Bella and Will had both found a good balance with their mutual focus on their daughter they shared who had just reached the mark of turning four years of age a week earlier, being of their primary concern. But in addition, they had also found a comfortable medium in their own relationship which allowed them to be in a place with one another where they not only cooperatively co-parented Allie, but a place where they would both consider one another as one of their closest friends.

Slowly, Will had managed to develop a good relationship and bond with his daughter whose first year he had missed out on, due to both parent's combined stubbornness. However, with adequate time, Bella had permitted extensions to Will's access with Allie, first beginning with him taking her for an afternoon, which eventuated into a whole day, then a overnight sleepover, to the point of shared custody between both parent's. Now, the two spent three days a week with Allie, exclusively, as well as spending one day a week together as a family, while Will had her three nights a week to Bella's four.

Triggered by glancing at his daughter's books and seeing her 'Learn with Peppa Pig' book where he could clearly identify every character on the cover, Will pondered the fact that looking back to three years ago, there was no way that he would be able to name one, let alone have an intense discussion or conversation about every children's program that aired on TV. Three years ago, he had no idea that he would let a tot paint his toenails a blinding shade of pink (he has since learnt the lesson to invest in nail polish remover for himself, too), just with the sole purpose of pleasing her. He was also oblivious to the fact that he would be able to recite more children's songs than he could of the lyrics for the songs on the nightly 'Hot 30 Countdown'.

However, each and every one of both the individuals and the couples decisions over the last three years lead to the very place in their lives that they are now.

Looking out of the small window below Lewis's normal line of vision, he had to look down uncomfortably to see the views of the mountains,

the streams and rivers that progressively lead to an increase in roads, houses and establishments as the aircraft neared the city and their physical destination. At the same time as catching a look for himself, Lewis tried to describe the sights to an agitated Cleo, talking over the sleeping Filipino in between the two of them from her seat that confined her to the aisle seat.

Across the aisle, Rikki and Zane struggled to look out the different views from their window on the opposite side of the plane to Cleo and Lewis, with the couple bickering over their knowledge of the city and what they could see from above, debating what the visible landmarks were and where. Behind the argumentative couple, Allie could see past her bulkier father to see the views out of the plane caught her attention " for a few minutes at least!

"What is that down there? Why is it so little? Where are we now? Why are the clouds going away? Are we there yet?" the inquisitive tot questioned to whoever would answer her as she shot out every question that passed through her little mind.

"That, A?" Will confirmed as he looked out to see the same scenery as his daughter.

"That's Sydney. That's where they found Nemo."

Finally, after a one and a half hour flight, the seven had landed at the destination of their summer holiday that had been a work of communal planning over the last few months, with the trip marking the beginning of summer and the holiday season, which the friends had chosen to share in the different state and city.

It was Zane and Will's umpteenth trip (hence, naming them as the delegated tour guides of the trip) to the more southern city of Sydney. While Cleo, Lewis and Bella had all visited once or twice every now and then, it was Rikki's first trip to the city which she had no idea of how greatly it would be going to change her present and future life.

However, as they all neared the destination, it was not only Rikki whose life's about to reach a turning point, just with some of the 7 experiencing more changes than others...

* * *

><p>Bondi Beach, Sydney,
New South Wales:**

"HOLDING THE BALL!" Zane exclaimed in a loud grunt of protest to his best mate's foul move in the three boy's smaller imitation of Aussie Rule's, or AFL, football.

In the explanation of their own variation of the game to the uninterested girl's, they had included the fact that there are three teams as they were all on their own individual teams, another twist on the original rule of two teams of 22 footballers. Basically, it was just a game of 'keep-the-ball-away-from-each-other-for-as-long-as-possible'.

Meanwhile, far in from the shore and away from the slowly rising water, three girls and a preschooler sat amongst the sand, sipping an assortment of Vodka Cruiser's and Midori Splice's from straws.

The sun was hot. The sand was warm. The drinks were cold. Life was good.

Cleo was reading a new novel that she had splashed out to buy herself as a holiday treat and Rikki lay on her stomach, alternating between positions and angles to capture photos from. It was safe to say that both girl's were far more relaxed and tranquil than Bella, as she alternated between feeding Allie melon or sultanas and convincing her to dig through the dry sand with her bucket and spade... anything to keep her daughter as far away from the water as possible, cursing whoever's decision it was to visit the iconic and primarily tourist-based, Bondi beach in eastern Sydney.

Shortly after the ball made its way into the water after Lewis was too close to the shore and at the same time as Zane's tackle, a unanimous decision was made to take a quarter, or halftime break, depending on how long the boy's stayed interested in their game. Zane retrieved the ball from the water (submerging himself far further in the waves than what he needed to), being the last to plonk down on the sand next to the girl's.

"Gimme a kiss, Rik" Zane teased as he neared his wet body closer to his long-term girlfriend's, knowing that unless he wanted to risk revealing the girl's secret on one of Australia's most popular beaches, he would never actually touch her while being so soaking wet.

Just as Zane knew he would never touch her, Rikki knew Zane wouldn't either, but that didn't stop her from squirming away in the sand from her settled position as she stifled a laugh.

Laughing as he noticed the total parallel to amusement written on his daughter's face from the affection of the couple in a such a close vicinity to the horrified four year old, Will decided to distract Allie from her disgust of Zane and Rikki's flirtatiousness.

"Great sandcastle you got going there, kiddo."

While Allie had a far greater memory than she had even just a year earlier, the tot was still at that age of distractions being able to completely derail previous trains of thought " working as both an advantage and disadvantage to her parents in particular.

"Thanks daddy. It's a Fairy's castle" Allie informed with a smile. Any irritation from the loved-up couple's PDA's was completely eradicated.

Of course, the young father played along with the complimenting game for the sake of his child's ego, telling her how he thought the pile of sand looked 'exactly' like a castle for Fairies and that the unidentifiable structure was 'the best he had ever seen'.

Inches away from Will and Allie were Cleo and Lewis. Cleo was comfily laying on her stomach as she read her book that had been specially allocated for their holiday, while Lewis crept as close to her as he could without running the risk of getting her wet from the isolated parts of his body which were still holding the traces of liquid, as he asked questions about Cleo's book, taking a special interest in the novel that had been purchased at the same time as his latest

Scientific textbook.

Life was very good.

A statement that each member of the group would agree with.

After a period of three years, all six of the adults had worked hard to attain a position in their lives where life could be considered really good and really comfortable.

But, comfortable wasn't a word to describe the way that their lives would stay...

* * *

><p>So what did we think? I am really happy with the change of scenery by writing in Sydney, so I hope you're enjoying that too. There's a lot of fun and a lot still come from this trip...

I'll try to reply to any burning questions or feedback as soon as I can, but it may not be immediately or for a few days as my whole week has been manipulated by 'Wedding World' and appointments or preparation for it as I'm in my friend's wedding weekend.

**All reviews, favourites, follows and etc are gratefully appreciated! **

Next chapter: As the group are enjoying being quite the tourists, Zane is evidently on edge and covering the tracks of his secret. What is he hiding from Rikki and their friends?

2. That Heady Rush

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all of your wonderful feedback on the first chapter of Far From Perfection 2. I felt like it was quite different to anything I'd written in the first story as it was a lot fluffier and more group-involving than I wrote before. Also it was in third person for a change. I stick with third person for the first few chapters of this story and I believe I will also end with a few third person chapters for this one too.

**In other news, I just discovered that I have already written over a third of this story! I cannot believe how quickly that has gone by. I'm really hoping updates are going to be more frequent and less spasmodic with this story and so far I think I'm doing well with that! I've updated like 4 times in 3 weeks! **

Enjoy chapter 2! I hope you'll like it as much as or more than the first. It's another reasonably fluffy chapter, but by the end, the cogs start moving to really get this story started...

* * *

><p>Chapter Two " That Heady Rush

Darling Harbour,

Sydney, New South Wales:

The group of seven wandered around Sydney's secondary harbour, Darling Harbour, en-route to some of the cities foremost tourist attractions. In the harbour, three of the five were located directly next to each other in the order of _Wildlife Sydney Zoo_, _Madame Tussaud's_ and the _Sydney Sea Life Aquarium_ consecutively placed away from the water and at the end of the pier.

After the disaster of Bondi Beach, Bella had vowed to keep Allie away from any -and all "swimmable, open water and suggested that the aquarium would be a good destination to visit, especially when most of the group was passionately interested in marine life. And, on the plus side she had suggested it because it would be all tanks and glass enclosures, keeping all the girls safe from and, especially Allie, _far_ away from water hazards.

She was wrong.

Almost as though the four year old had known about her mother's vow, Allie had made it her task to get both of her parent's into as many unintentionally sticky situations as she could manage.

From the earliest point possible, Allie began shooting out a little too revealing questions to her father, mother and beloved 'aunties' and 'uncles' regarding the marine life such as "_can we see this when we swim to Mako?_", "_where are all of the other mermaids?_" and "_look! That tail looks just like mine!_"

Needless to say, Bella and Will became quite the experts at explaining their daughter's 'vivid and overactive imagination' to explain Allie's public tongue-slips after revealing too much about her swimming experiences to other members of the public within hearing range of the four year olds questions.

The next difficulty was upon reaching the interactive rock pool, where patrons could dip their hands in to feel and touch assorted starfish, crabs and shells in the shallow water. Before either Bella or Will had a chance to distract Allie and walk straight passed it, after a worker had asked the group if they wanted to feel the coral, Allie had answered for herself, almost dunking her hand in the water before her father caught and picked her up as quickly as possible.

"Sorry. We have to keep moving. We're on a tight schedule" Will lied to the unfazed worker and his irritated daughter.

* * *

><p>All of the girls had especially loved the aquarium, being able to see some animals they were familiar with, but from a different perspective, as well as watching new one's that they had never come across on their swims before.

Under the marine sector, all in the group had had their own personal favourite animal or exhibit that they took extra time to savour and enjoy. For Lewis, it was the scientific and biological marvel of seahorses that took his interest, considering how the male seahorse is the carrier of offspring. While Cleo loved comparing all of the exhibits between the ones she saw daily and worked at between the Sydney version, she was especially fond of the penguins, taking her

time to read the profiling and pairings of every individual, before trying to pick them out in the exhibit personally. Bella was fascinated by the small jellyfish, in such an environmentally complimentary tank with the colour changing lights which was quite a beautiful, graceful show for the eyes. Zane, ever the marine enthusiast (especially since his 'shark' incident for Lewis's short film) was most infatuated with the gift shop where the eyes of figurines and toys _didn't_ watch him perilously in a room full of marine-associated dollar symbols. Will was ecstatic to see the Dugongs in the big mammals sector, as they had been an animal he had been fascinated with as a boy, but due to their rare status he had failed to see one for many years. Finally, Rikki loved the stingrays... Although Zane became a little concerned of her motives behind the interest when she spent ages studying and verbally expressing her curiosity of '_how a stingray could stab a person in the heart, like it did to Steve Irwin_'. Zane simply used it as a reminder to remember to stay on the mermaid's good side.

The visit to the _Madame Tussaud's_ waxwork figures attraction was much enjoyed, but for the youngest in the group, it was a disaster. Allie was beyond freaked out by "_the scary people who won't move_". Before they had even reached the Australian sporting greats, Will had to cover her eyes and carry her out of the tourist-attraction building (walking straight passed his photo opportunity with Miranda Kerr; much to his disappointment) entertaining her until the remaining five sauntered through the exit to join the bored father-daughter duo.

Finally at the end of the pier and the closest building to the water of the three, the group reached the _Wildlife Sydney Zoo_.

If it hadn't of been for a free ticket to the attraction with the combo package, the group would have skipped a visit to the zoo, knowing full well of the unbearable 'Australian animals' stereotypes that lay inside.

Zane especially struggled to remain sane within the confines of the building. After passing a few animals, he began to revert to some of his more villainous ways, telling as many horrified overseas tourists as he could: "_Welcome to Australia. We're actually more used to seeing koalas and kangaroos dead on the side of the road, than alive. Cheaper than visiting this place, too! Enjoy your stay_."

Needless to say, with Zane's harshness, the group didn't stay in there all that long â€" simply getting through and taking a few pictures along the way as quickly as they could.

* * *

><p>"SO, what next peeps?!" Rikki enthusiastically questioned the group as a collective as the seven trailed out through the doors of the final attraction.<p>

Cleo groaned as she walked, looking over to her husband "Sorry if I'm a party pooper, but I'm thinking I might head back to the hotel room for a while to lie down. I'm learning the hard way that champagne breakfasts and too much walking, and, or sun is not the brightest idea or the best mix."

"Do you think you'll have time? Don't forget that dinner at _Sydney

Tower is booked for 7!" Zane nervously warned before it had even been confirmed whether or not Cleo and Lewis would be returning to the George Street accommodation or not anyway.

"That's hours away, Zane" Rikki teased with an eye roll, beginning to reach the end of her tether regarding her boyfriend's high priority of the dinner reservation, which seemed to be as important as one with the Queen.

However, Zane eventually won out and the group all ended up heading back to the hotel rooms. With an hour or so remaining to kill, standing in the way of the reservation at the Sydney Westfield Tower Eye on Market Street.

To pass the time, Will and Zane decided on hitting the communal gym facility included in the accommodation, only needing to allow five minutes turn around, just enough time for a shower and change before leaving again.

After somehow managing to wrangle the boys into taking Allie with them for her to occupy herself with the exercise balls and raise questions about every single piece of equipment in the room, Bella and Rikki were in the downstairs cafe, enjoying the peace and quiet of a girly chat. Initially Lewis was planning on hanging out with one or both of the boys while his wife napped in their hotel room before they needed to leave, but he found himself far more content with the concept of reading a book in the room after catching wind of the boys plan to go down to the gym.

* * *

><p>After regrouping in the foyer and setting off on their way again for the five minute walk, they reached the tower; the location which had caused much angst and excitement for Zane, while the other adults teased him over the fact that you couldn't miss the place that towered over every other building which he had been so worked up and anxious about locating.<p>

Despite hesitations of being about to ascend so high into the sky from some more than others (including Zane, who had been the ringleader of the outing); the seven piled into one of the elevators, shooting up the 76 floors at a startling rate of two floors a second, all in order to reach the restaurant located on the second highest observation tower in the Southern Hemisphere.

Exiting the doors of the small confine after the less than forty second trip, from the second that the doors were opened each individual was uplifted, with a stolen breath from the views that were like nothing else that they could ever compare it to.

In view was the setting sun, the tops of tall buildings and skyscrapers along the streets in the very heart of Sydney, the figures of the Blue Mountains in the distance to the west, the Northern Beaches sprawled ahead north, with Botany Bay and the airport visible to the south, the harbours, the coast, the various islands and the open water that stretched all the way to New Zealand on the east. It was a phenomenal, breathtaking sight, without a doubt.

With the atmosphere and distant 360° panoramic views enrapturing

the group, the room they stood in and the restaurant around them was a last priority to look at... The revolving restaurant that if they had of been released from their surrounding's charm, they would have realized that Zane had booked out entirely for the purpose of their sole use.

Looking over to her boyfriend to check he hadn't bolted back down the elevators to return to solid ground in an anxiety attack at the heights, Rikki was still amazed that Zane had been so eager to initiate the outing to the tower. However, as she looked over to check his presence, she was half surprised to find Zane was still standing there, by her side, triggering her realization as she noticed the rest of the room.

"You are kidding, Zane! You've gone all out. Did you have a spare couple thousand just laying around that you needed to blow or something?!" Rikki mused as she looked around the evidently empty room with the one table marked with a '_Reserved_' sign that probably didn't need to be there for anyone carrying even just half of a brain.

While the most obvious points of the restaurant room was the view and the fact that it was completely empty and reserved for the group of friends and the staff that was there to serve them privately, it was the finer and more extensively planned ambient details that went unnoticed by most... The fresh flowers that most patrons of the restaurant would not be surrounded by due to the added expenses of arrangement, the candles around the room that had been arranged along with the booking and the playlist of songs playing softly in the background, handpicked from favourites of every member of the group.

For the next few minutes, before anyone had even managed to reach their seat and sit down, the adults among the group absorbed the atmosphere from all angles of the large open room while the youngster in the group caught sight of the large platters of food which captured her attention and interest compared to the scenery she was a little too young to truly appreciate.

Eventually, triggered by Allie's nags over the luxurious buffet of food she had been ogling desirably, the seven made their way to the seats allocated on the one main table of the floor 260 metres above the ground level of Pitt Street.

Food and all of the different choices of such quickly became the topic of conversation for the hungry group before Zane caught their attention in just enough time before they left the table with food being the only thing on their mind.

Rising from his seat with a nervous breath, Zane Bennett struggled to determine which was more frightening â€" the fact that he was so ridiculously high up in the air, suspended by only a few poles and overlapping wires or the question he was dying to get off of his chest and into the open.

"Sorry guys. I'm sure that you are hungry, but I just wanted to get your attention for a few moments. You might be wondering what the heck we're doing up here, especially when I'm not going to hide the fact that heights and I have never been good friends. The thing is that I just wanted to explain a few things before I ask one of the

most important questions of my life."

It was more than obvious which direction Zane was leading and alluding to, which his friend's quickly caught on to, with their attention fixated on the nervous brunette.

"Thanks for coming up here, all of you" Zane thanked in general to his friends who had joined him in showing up for the reservation, before his focus dead-panned in on Rikki.

"Anyway, I wanted to come up here because I think that the Sydney Tower Eye and heights in general reminds me of that day when we were locked out on the balcony during the conference. I feel like that was the first time and moment where we truly connected and I began to fall in love with you, when you helped me overcome my fear of heights and it is a memory that I will treasure for the rest of my life."

Zane looks away from Rikki, out the windows surrounding him and the others in every direction before continuing to speak in the dead-silent room, where every person was holding onto his every word.

"That balcony would have only been about a quarter of the height of this tower. That was why I wanted to bring you here... Before I met you, before I connected with you that day, this is a place I would never have even dreamed to make it up to the top of, not over my dead body. That's why I wanted to do this here and show you the significance of and as a testament to how far we have come over the last few years, together, as well as as individuals. This is just one small example of how we bring out the best in each other."

As she alternated between tapping her father and mother's shoulders for attention and someone to answer her question of when they could eat, and henceforth, fill her little belly with the food that she tormentingly saw in the distance, Allie was on a completely different wavelength to the adults, paying the least attention to the scene in front of her.

Lewis, ever the romantic, was fixated on the psychology behind the event, trying to read both Zane and Rikki's body language and expressions. He read the fact that Zane was possibly more nervous than he had ever seen him be before. Looking to Rikki "however- was a very different story. You didn't need any expert knowledge to see the fact that she looked more than startled, sitting there like a stunned mullet as she listened.

Cleo, the hopeless romantic was almost brought to tears from the special moment that was playing out before her, quietly jealous of all the thought and effort that had gone into the moment for her least-romantic friend.

Creeping down memory lane, she remembered the night of her own proposal. She knew it was coming. Lewis asked for her ring size and preference over diamonds, rubies or sapphires. The surprise in the evening was that despite the romantic picnic dinner at Mako Island, where she waited through the entire three course meal for Lewis to pop the question at any moment, her boyfriend at the time had unintentionally wimped out of asking her the question for the entire evening. In fact, the point of which he mustered up the courage was

on her driveway, in the car after they arrived home when he asked her from the driver's seat in the dark of midnight. So, as he finally pulled out the beautiful ring she'd been dying to see, she couldn't even catch a glimpse of it through the dimly-lit car before she said 'yes'.

Similarly to Cleo, Bella adored the romantic gesture, with just as much jealousy in comparison to her own extremely short-lived engagement with her ex-boyfriend, Daniel which had ended badly in every sense of the word. The 'effort' involved in her proposal was short, sharp and shiny...just enough to get the job 'done'. He'd put together every Facebook photo including each other from both of their accounts, sticking in a couple of songs and splashed out on a sparkler to win her 'yes'. Even in the heat of the moment Bella could smell the faux tainting the event, the fact that it was more about Daniel keeping her and winning her than loving her enough to commit to spending the rest of his life with her.

Watching the scene play out, Will was absolutely stoked for his best guy-friend and girl-friend, as long as Rikki said yes of course. However, in the moment and with his complete surprise at the event, he fought the temptation to feel offended that as his best mate, Zane hadn't told, mentioned or even alluded anything about his plans to Will.

"So, I guess what I am trying to say and what I wanted our nearest and dearest to be with us for is me swallowing my ego and undeservedly asking my beautiful girlfriend whether you, Rikki Chadwick will do me the greatest honour of marrying me?"

Rikki was no fool. She didn't take long to not only suspect, but to also confirm her thoughts over what was happening, what Zane was trying to say and what words were coming as he warmed up to pop the big question.

However, just because she knew the question that was coming, it does not mean that she was any more prepared for and any less startled and surprised by the question itself...

* * *

><p>Soooo, what did you all think about that?! I'm a little apprehensive as to how the proposal will be taken, because typically, I don't see Zikki as a soppy, romantic couple necessarily so I was hesitant to write such an over-the-top proposal. But saying that, I personally could see it being the approach Zane would take as the natural rich-kid way of trying to buy people in a way. It's like a bit of a security blanket in a way.

**Anyway, I'd appreciate your thoughts and feedback on anything to do with this chapter! Don't forget to review, follow and favourite :)
**

Next chapter: The aftermath of the proposal. What will **Rikki say? Also, Lewis has a treat in store for Cleo, while Will pushes the limits with Bella. **

****Hey all, another chapter... These updates are becoming weekly! I just wanted to stick this one up so that all of the passionate Zikki readers would have an answer to the cliffy - I know what a drag having to wait for a resolution is! ****

****I've had an eventful week... I had 2 exams and then 2 babies (a day apart!) were born in my family after my cousin was born and another cousin had a baby too. ****

****Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter! Your support of this means so much. Anyway, enjoy the new chapter! ****

*** * ***

<p>Chapter Three " The Right Time

With Rikki & Zane:

The answer was yes. Despite Rikki's half an hour of hesitations and Zane's half an hour of succinct assurances, the answer was always going to be yes.

... Well for that one question anyway. The questions that followed that were a very different story.

"No! We are not getting married at that stupid BMX Park with stunt motorbikes flying over our heads as we say 'I do'. No amount of convincing will work, Zane!"

At this point, after an hour of arguing, refusals over one another's suggestions and flying words, the newly engaged couple were heading closer to digging each other's graves than they were to walking down the aisle.

Obviously none of the planning was set in stone, but at this point there was nothing to set in stone.

They were unable to agree on who they were to ask for their wedding party, the month, a honeymoon location (Rikki was dead-set for a isolated tropical island while Zane was sold on 'backpacking' through Europe's five star resorts), the venue, the number of bridesmaids and groomsmen were uneven no matter how hard they tried, and that wasn't even mentioning who was being partnered with whom.

"Fine. If we have it at Mako, then I'm having Will as my best man with Nate and Lewis."

"You can't have Will as your best man if Cleo's my maid of honour, that's just awkward! No one wants Nate in this wedding! If Nate's a groomsmen, neither Bella nor Tam will even want to be in the wedding in case they're partnered with him!"

Zane shrugged smugly, knowing the relentless stubbornness of both parties would result in them being led back onto the same loop track that they had spent the last twenty minutes on discussing the wedding party alone.

"In that case, then you have to narrow it down to two bridesmaids. If Nate's out, there are no other guys I want as groomsmen."

With an eye roll as she crossed her arms, there was almost a mutual understanding that that subject of the wedding party had been exhausted enough for the day in their completely, absolutely and totally unproductive wedding planning bickers. Rikki in all of her fire, decided to only make worse as she reverted back to one of their last arguments regarding clothing, after she had actually been the one to prematurely end twenty minutes earlier saying that it was against 'tradition' (not that either of the couple cared for that) for him to know even the slightest detail about her dress.

"And just for the record, I am not getting married in a big, poufy and especially NOT white dress. My name is not Cinder-freaking-rella. I couldn't give a damn about tradition. White dresses and white clothing of any sort is an accident waiting to happen. Maybe I could go with something red... or black... or patterned!"

As with much of their relationship, Zane and Rikki were unable to see eye-to-eye, or even see simply as far as one another's perspectives.

As far as Zane was concerned, he was absolutely right in his own opinion, while as far as Rikki was concerned, she was undoubtedly the correct one.

Regardless, it didn't change the fact that at this rate, Zane and Rikki would be attending two very different weddings, with two very different themes and venues, in front of two very different weddings parties and guests and going on two very different honeymoons.

Zane's wedding would be an intricate and extravagant affair, making sure that he was the man of the moment with his wife to be, and that nobody would forget that over the course of the day. Rikki on the other hand would be happy with any and all of the formalities ending after the moment 'I do' was uttered.

Zane wouldn't accept anything less than a five-course-meal or degustation-meal, while Rikki would be content with charcoal chicken and chips on the beach.

Different worlds...

The big question, the biggest since Zane had popped the question, was whether or not the couple would ever work together as a team, with each other's interests in mind and make enough self-sacrificing decisions to plan an actual wedding, or not.

* * *

><p>Elsewhere, walking through The Rocks and en-route to Circular Quay, Cleo, Lewis, Will, Bella and Allie were passing under the Sydney Harbour Bridge which towered above them and the footpath, cars above whirring passed in both directions to Milson or Millers Point.<p>

"Do you think I can touch?!" the four-year-old asked to whoever would answer her as she stretched her small arm high up in the air with the innocent hope of touching the top of the metal that was unreachably high and unmovable - many, many metres above the little girl.

Below Allie, Will gripped onto the tot's knees from where she sat on his shoulders, feeling as though she was the tallest person alive. In her perception, based on height alone Allie considered her tall, young father as being "_more than a hundred_", just as she thought she would be able to touch the Harbour Bridge in her belief she was so high up.

"Not quite Allie" Cleo laughed as she glanced over to the outstretched toddler, exerting herself to try and make the impossible achievement.

"Maybe you'll reach it the next time you see the Harbour Bridge, sweetie."

As he walked alongside the married couple and their romantically entangled hands, Will too laughed at Allie's innocently unrealistic ambition.

"Dream big... that's my girl!"

The other three adults expressed their amusement at the comment and general dialogue over the last few minutes, at different levels ranging from a laugh, to a giggle and a beam.

"So what do you lot have planned for the rest of the day?" Lewis asked a few minutes later, after conversation began to die down and dwindle.

The question was posed as the group, who were walking away from The Rocks and Walsh Bay, reached a line of direct contact with the Sydney Opera House... Aside from the water of the Harbour leading up to the ferry moorings, separating them from the landmark due to the natural, water-filled horseshoe shape harbour.

"Well before we discovered Allie and aquariums are a recipe for disaster, we were planning to take her to the _Manly Aquarium_ too. Now we're thinking _Taronga Zoo_, if we can be bothered getting across the water to it" Bella explained lightly to the couple who had plans of their own. "What about you two?"

Lewis smiled proudly, raising his wife's hand to his lips as he pressed a gentle kiss to the outer side of her hand. "Well, _I_ am treating my wife to a _Lindt_ lunch today."

"Oh come on! Between you and Zane, is Sydney the new '_city of love'_ or something?! Why didn't anybody send me the memo to bring a guy if I wanted all stops to be pulled out with being pampered?!" Bella declared disgustedly, in a light-hearted whine of jealousy regarding her fellow female companions.

"The most romantic gesture I've had so far this trip was our taxi guy telling me that he would be a gentlemen and put my suitcase in the boot! Sign me up for every single one of those pathetic matchmaking reality TV shows right this minute!"

While Cleo burst into a fit of laughter at one of her best friend's dramatic antics, she wasn't about to admit the fact that she was thinking that she would _definitely_ prefer to be in her position, compared to being in Bella's.

Life was good. A romantic lunch date for two is always welcome. A holiday is always a mood lifter. Plus, in comparison to the last few days of bringing an illness on holiday with her, she was feeling a whole world better.

* * *

><p>What is that saying about speaking too soon? Touch wood? Any of the above.<p>

By the time Cleo and Lewis had decided to walk it to the Cockle Bay Wharf Lindt Cafe to absorb the Sydney atmosphere and sun, Cleo could feel the beginning sensations that she had been getting to, knowing that the feeling was just warming up and getting started.

Each step was an effort that made her feel helplessly woozier, seedier and more light-headed.

Lewis, had been in front, holding his wife's hand as he led her up the steps and passed a few other fine-dining restaurants, bars and cafes, before the two reached their destination right in the rounded corner of the half-circle shaped dining area which overlooked Darling Harbour. It was only as Lewis slowed to take in the scenery that he noticed Cleo's whitening facial tone, that had become familiar and a recognizable sign since the day before they had left for the holiday, while Cleo was packing.

"I'm not going to force-feed you food just because we had a date if you're not feeling a hundred percent. We can always take a raincheck and come back when you're feeling better, Cleo."

Cleo shook her head. She knew that if she were to return home to the hotel, sans-date when she knew how uncommon dates that her husband planned were, she would feel worse than she would having to sit through a romantic lunch date, feigning her enjoyment of rich and indulgent foods that she could barely stomach the thought of.

"No we'll stay. We've come all this way and what means the most is how you were the one to put the thought and effort into arranging it for us."

"Sure?"

Cleo confirmed her husband's hesitant question with a brief kiss, before squandering up all the effort she could to lead him into to the cafe and their reserved seats opposite each other.

"So where did you find out about this place?" Cleo questioned, looking intently at Lewis. She tried to distract herself and keep her focus as far as possible away from the glass display units, holding all the rich and decadent desserts she was trying to separate her mind from, along with the fresh, warm, chocolaty fragrances that lingered passed as they travelled through the room from the kitchen.

"Well you know how crazy I can get with research..." Lewis chuckled, remembering a few of the many times Cleo had declared he'd gone overboard with the extent of his research into anything... From the new restaurant opening down the road, to what sort of fishing lure's

were available internationally.

She shouldn't have been surprised, but for some reason Cleo just wasn't quite feeling the same, or on the top of her game.

"So what are you going to order, milady?"

The question she'd been dreading. She could barely consider food for longer than a grimacing second, so the thought of having to choose something in particular, requiring thought, focus and opinion on food was an impossible task.

"I've liked the whole spontaneity and surprise element of this date... You can choose something you think I'll like and surprise me!" Cleo suggested, pulling all her strength that she could muster up together to produce an enthusiastic smile for her husband.

After pressing a kiss to the exposed side of her hand, as her palm's were rested on the clean surface, Lewis got up to examine the displays and make a consecutive decision based on what he saw.

His distraction was just what she needed to keep up the facade of appearing to feel way better than what she did, with a chance for the relief she needed. Pulling her black handbag that she'd been nursing all day onto her lap, Cleo searched purposefully for the long, thin rectangle box she knew was within her bag. Finally finding and clutching the packet she quickly extracted one of the two packets within, pressing down with just enough force to release two of the Panadol Forte tablets into the palm of her hand, quickly transferring them to her mouth and managing to swallow the pills without the risk of requiring water.

Within a few minutes, Lewis returned to the table, looking as proud as punch with himself, clearly confident in the decisions he had made regarding their order.

"Thanks again for organizing this, hun" Cleo smiled, with a greater ease of genuine feeling as she leant over with her body language clearly directing him to join her halfway as she leant marginally across the table, as their lips met in a public display of affection, suitable for their romantic little date.

* * *

><p>After a full day of strolling around Sydney Harbour, followed by a trip over to Taronga Zoo, it was safe to say that Allie was beyond tired.

The overtired four-year-old had crashed in father's arms before they had even boarded the ferry to head back to Circular Quay, where she stayed for the trip back across, through the Harbour again, the CBD and along George Street to the group's accommodation.

Hurrying ahead of the father and daughter as they exited the hotel's elevator, leading to all of the consecutive rooms that the group booked, Bella rushed to open the door for Will, to enable him to carry Allie through easier, holding the door for him as he did.

"Thanks for carrying her, Will. You've probably lost all feeling in

your arm and shoulder by now... I know what a dead-weight she is to carry!"

"It's all good. What else do you think I go to the gym for?!" Will joked as he carried Allie over to the king-sized bed she temporarily shared with her mother.

When the group had joined forces to choose and book accommodation for their trip, Bella and Will made the logically cheaper decision to split the cost and hire a room together. After looking into options, they discovered that it would cost Will double the amount sharing would result in, to get a room of the exact same size that Bella and Allie would be sharing, that even had more than enough room for the two of them.

Opening the bed sheets with one hand difficultly, Will lowered his daughter from his body to the mattress, doing so gently and slowly to ease her into the new environment she was being moved into, to avoid her waking.

After having dumped her handbag in a corner of the room, Bella pulled out a few essentials "phone and water bottle-, before joining the other two in the vicinity of the bed, to ensure that her daughter hadn't woken up in the transition from chest-to-mattress.

Bella smiled from her view of Allie, roughly a metre away from the settled sleeper, who didn't even move a muscle as Will tucked a few locks of her unruly hair behind her ear and pressed a gentle kiss to her small temple, before stepping away.

"She is so damn beautiful when she sleeps" Bella grinned, transfixed on her daughter. Ever since Allie was a newborn, Bella would find herself spending more time than she ever intended to on just standing there and watching her sleep.

Both parent's attention was caught on the same thing, before Will took another step away from the bed after announcing that watching Allie sleep had inspired him to sleep too.

"Night. Thanks again for your help with her."

After a hug goodnight, there was only a brief look, a flicker, but it was a mutual and wordless message, which both parties tried to encrypt... A message that might very well change things as they stood there sharing a smile and certain signals.

After the small flicker and the brief spark had been lit, or in this case, reignited, the attraction was seemingly almost magnetic.

It seemed that Will was a few steps ahead, literally and figuratively as he slowly moved forward slightly, but nonetheless closing the gap to a comfortable, but far more intimate distance closer to Bella.

A few moments of comfortable silence passed, neither of them moving and neither of them saying anything before Will bit the bullet, slowly but surely craning his head lower, oh-so slowly. It was clear to both of them what would come next, for the first time in a very long time, but before Will's lips met Bella's there was another movement that came first.

Beneath the closing gap of Will's head, Bella shook her own head slowly, but clearly to extinguish the flames of the friendly fire that had been ignited within the last few moments.

"Sorry..." Will whispered as he retracted his head to normal level, as though nothing was about to happen.

Bella shook her head quickly and Will could sense she was nervous, diverting to one of her moods where she was going to start over-talking pretty soon, when she didn't know what to do or what refined words to say. "No, don't be sorry. I reciprocated the signals, I just froze."

"There's actually something I've been thinking about talking to you about recently. Of course, I shouldn't have gone about it that way though!"

"What?..." Bella asked warily, almost looking a little petrified as to not knowing what exactly was going to be coming out of her ex's mouth next.

Leaning against the chair that the two had unknowingly and subconsciously walked closer and closer to, Will let out a brief exhale, looking down to the ground before his gaze returned back to Bella's blue eyes.

"I'm just putting this out there, but if you think otherwise just forget what I say and let's just act like I said nothing at all, okay?"

Bella nodded enthusiastically, so as to tell Will to continue with what he had to say, but really, she was more curious than ever by what he did actually have to say, regardless of whether she would reciprocate his opinion or suggestion, whatever it was, or not.

"I think we should give you and me another shot, Bells."

"What? Where did that come from?" Bella questioned, taking a small step back from the impact of the statement hitting her, as she thought up at least twenty-five other shocking statements that she would be less shocked about.

Will shrugged, taking a moment to consider the origin of his thoughts that to his knowledge had just been a seed in the back of his mind that was slowly growing bigger and bigger in recent times.

"I don't know what exactly triggered it, but while we've been here, we've almost been acting and functioning like a family, I guess... And that's been really nice. Then that sort of got me thinking of what a good place we are in with Allie now and how much that's paid off for working on establishing that for the past few years. But maybe it's time to focus on you and me for a change..."

It was all true.

Without even realizing it, they had been acting like and interacting unintentionally as though they were a completely functional, happy couple with a child. And it was nice.

They were in a really, really good place both in terms of balancing

responsibilities and caring for Allie, with them splitting the load almost half, but more than that, both parent would say that their personal relationships were going well with their daughter. Allie was close to Bella, just as Allie was also close to Will. Not to mention the half-week change in residence was not something that fazed the carefree and sociable little girl who liked the variety of people she would live with.

The time and hard work that they had both poured into raising their daughter and reaching comfortable mediums really had paid off for a harmonious system between the three.

The only factor that Bella was unsure about regarding what Will had said was whether it was 'their' turn to be focused on... Whether they should even try to develop their own relationship again... Whether it would even work...

"I don't know Will... You and I are in such a good and completely comfortable position with working together for Allie that I'm a bit worried that trying anything _more_ than that will tip things over. Especially if it doesn't work out...again."

Neither of them had really realized that they had slowly been nearing each other closer and closer, until they were directly in front of one another, more or less breathing down each other's necks, speaking in a whispered tone for more reasons than one.

"But you won't know if we don't try, right? Life's too short."

* * *

><p>So, thoughts? Anyone think Zane and Rikki will ever get married at this stage? Hope you guys enjoyed the bit of Clewis fluff - much more fun than sad GBS stuff, but all good things have to come to an end. And what is everyone hoping will be the result of Will's suggestion? **

**Keep the reviews coming... I'll update the second I get to 25 reviews... Well not quite, but you know what I mean haha. **

Next chapter: As the girls enjoy a night of drinking and partying away from the boys, secrets slip out. Also, Bella gives a Will an answer.

4. Girl's Night Out

Wow guys! You totally surpassed my expectations - thanks! I had no idea I'd get to the number of reviews so quickly!

Enjoy the 'girls night out'... I wrote this chapter months and months ago, yet coincidentally, a big group of friends and I are ditching the boys for our own girls night out tomorrow and the day after! That's assuming I'll survive my most boring class and a work shift before that tomorrow haha. Three guesses what will make tomorrow better for me until the evening...? Reviews!

**Anyway, I hope you'll enjoy this new update! **

* * *

<p>Chapter Four " Girls Night Out

"Have fun" Lewis requested with a smile as he pressed a kiss to the cheek of one of three giggling girls who hovered around the doorway, more than ready to leave.

In celebration of Rikki's recent engagement, the girls had decided to seize the event and the holiday as an excuse to party and celebrate. Consequently, they organized a night out on the town in the bright lights, and right in the middle of the big city.

Stepping away from the other two girls, Bella crouched down with ease, despite her six centimetre stilettos to shrink to the height of the little girl who was standing in front of her father, with his hand on her small shoulder.

"Bye sweetheart. Make sure that you are a good girl for daddy, and don't grumble or ask to stay up when he tells you to go to bed, okay? I'll be home soon."

Pyjama-clad Allie nodded to her mother, distractedly, outstretching her hand to grasp one of the extremely large, shiny, metallic earrings that was like a magpie-to-metal for the little girl.

"Okay, mummy. You look very beautiful" Allie replied, evidently an expert on how far flattery can get you amid her mother's warnings. Despite the discipline, the younger girl was far more focused on Bella's glammed-up appearance, as she went from touching her earrings to brush her finger on the bright fuchsia matte lipstick on her mother's lips than what she was saying to her.

"She does, doesn't she?" Will added, joining the conversation uninvited, but receiving a big nod in affirmation from the younger of the two other girls who was still mesmerised by her mother's appearance.

"Aww, thank you, you two," Bella beamed especially from the little girl's genuine comment. She knew the honesty of children and she knew that any young kid would not say something they didn't mean, just for the sake of saying it.

Opening her arms to her child who instinctively moved into them, the parting mother and daughter shared an embrace for a few moments, while their surrounding friends were more distracted by their own cares. Zane and Rikki acted every inch the loved-up couple they were, enjoying the glow of their recent engagement. Cleo and Lewis just seemed dedicated to their conversation, independent from everyone other than themselves.

Despite being caught up with their own distractions and own focuses, it was as if there was a sensor alerting the other two girl's to the moment that Bella and Allie separated from the hug, reminding them that they should be leaving.

"I'll see you tonight" Cleo reminded, as if there was any option other than returning to their hotel room, where the two would eventually make their ways back to at different points in the night.

With a final brief kiss, Cleo and Lewis easily parted, while Zane and Rikki lingered in the very out of character and gushy embrace. The difference in departures allowed absolutely anybody to have the ability to distinguish the couple that had been married for a few years, compared to the one still thriving on the new and exciting event of their recent engagement.

Cleo backed away and slowly moved further and further away from the hotel room doorway to indicate to her friends that she was ready to leave and that their goodbyes were taking far too long.

Bella caught a glimpse of Cleo's body language, blowing a final kiss to her daughter, before directing her final warning to those adults that wouldn't be joining them for a night out.

"Be good, boys! Remember, you're looking after Miss _Innocence_ and her little ears tonight. Keep it clean!"

Zane was the first to pipe up about addressing the overprotective mother's concerns.

"Calm your farm. We've got a pretty risquÃ© night of playing '_Snakes and Ladders'_ planned. Then, if the kid falls asleep during the '_Dora the Explorer'_ marathon, we _might_ allow things to get a little less G rated, as long as that's okay with you, of course."

Bella laughed at the reply she received, as she followed Rikki and Cleo's lead out of the hotel room, closer and closer to the night of fun that lay ahead for the three of them...

* * *

><p>Zeta Bar, George Street, Sydney

Purchasing and carrying their drink of choice away from the bar, Rikki joined the arm-latching that Cleo and Bella had initiated.

As they made their way across the room and found a corner for them to claim as their own table for the time being, Bella was giggly before she had even taken one sip of her own alcoholic beverage.

"I love saying '_Pickled Tink'_! It makes me feel like I'm already tipsy!" Bella commented on the beverage sloshing around in the glass as she carried it with a lack of care.

Rikki simply laughed at her friend as they each took seats that allowed them to enjoy the atmosphere of the bar and converse in private conversations until they felt a little wilder later on as the night warmed up. Placing her phone, along with the glass, that held her _Vampires Kiss_ next to the pink glass of Bella's drink and Cleo's mocktail, Rikki got comfortable for a moment before her phone began to spasmodically vibrate and illuminate clearly in the dark room.

"Ooh. It's Zane. Better answer it. I'll be right back!"

Just like that, Rikki and her phone were gone within the one phone call which she left to answer outside in the quieter environment than there inside the bar where you practically needed to shout before

anyone else was able to hear you.

"I miss those days. They don't last long enough!" Cleo laughed, watching the blonde's eager path out the main exit, leaving for goodness knows how long, until either her or her fiancé could bear to be able to hang up.

Bella nodded with a laugh, the two being able to see clearly through the facade of love, that Rikki and Zane were currently barrelling through head-first, masked with the rose-coloured glasses.

The conversation slowly died down to a silence that was anything but awkward between the two girls. Instead, both reverted their focus back to the energy of the room and the club atmosphere, while they took the occasional sip of their drinks or when they'd make eye-contact, would share a smile to signify their mutual enjoyment.

However, there was just something small, a little niggle that caught Bella's attention, something that struck her as familiar which she could identify with and the more time that passed, the more certain she became.

"So what's with the mocktail, Cleo? You are over 18 aren't you?!" Bella joked with a laugh, while her friend looked down to the beverage, unimpressed, before returning her gaze to make eye-contact.

"It's a pretty exciting drink, hey?" Cleo grumbled sarcastically, sloshing the pale orangey coloured substance around carefully in the glass in a circular motion. "I haven't had the strongest stomach the last couple days, I guess. I didn't want to risk it by drinking alcohol if it's still too weak for it."

The excuse seemed legit and completely genuine, it definitely had a strong chance of being the reason, but with every sip of her own drink that was definitely not non-alcoholic, the more that she convinced herself into feeling confident enough to pose the question that had been suspiciously in the back of her mind since the girls had all ordered their first round of celebratory drinks.

"Cleo? Are you pregnant?"

The look of surprise that Cleo was completely unable to filter or dilute from her pure-shock said it all.

"No!" was the first word that Cleo could eventually choke out.

"... Yes. How could you tell that?" Cleo quickly added admittedly, asking her friend curiously before her face dropped momentarily when she looked down to double check that her flat stomach was still as flat as she remembered it.

"Congratulations!" Bella squealed, sweeping her friend up in a hug.

As if her thoughts and registration of what she saw were on two very different channels, Bella reassured her friend over her fright from a minute or so ago as she worried she was already visibly pregnant.

"Oh don't stress. You're so not showing yet. How far are you anyway?"

The calm ease that Bella had managed to create for her friend in reassurance was shattered quickly as her question reminded Cleo of another major factor.

"I don't know...A month? ...Maybe two? I haven't worked that out yet. I only found out yesterday! And Lewis, don't say a thing. Not to anyone. I haven't found the perfect moment to tell him yet, and I know how badly he'll take it first-hand, let alone if he finds this out second-hand."

"No worries, Cleo. Just you focus on trying to find the right time to tell him. You're in good hands - I'm an expert on keeping baby-daddy's from knowing about said babies, remember?"

Bella had cracked the joke and added the tail end of her response for the primary reason of making fun of herself, yet Cleo was the one who laughed at the comment, distracting her from her distress.

"Thanks Bella... But what I want to know is how the heck could you tell I'm pregnant then?!" Cleo smiled, until her face moulded into surprise as she realized just what she had said, regarding her friend's spookily correct prediction.

"Your drink" Bella simply stated, gesturing down to the non-alcoholic substance which her friend was still holding, despite having barely taken more than a few sips of the drink she was completely unenthused by.

"Well, sure, the fact that you ordered something non-alcoholic is a big tip off, but it was the way that you were staring at it. I know that look, when mocktails are the last thing that you want, or feel like drinking, but you just do it anyway. I recognize that feeling of being torn between your head and your heart. It's like injections. You don't like it, at all, but you just do it because you know it's for the best."

Cleo still appeared completely astounded and stunned by her friend's accuracy in so clearly and accurately identifying her feelings, as well as the source of it as well.

"Well, mind reader, can you tell me if I have reason to worry about something or not? I've been freaking out a bit because when I was feeling up for a drink, I had been guzzling alcohol like it is water before I realized this. Did you ever get drunk unintentionally when you were pregnant? Should I be worried-" Cleo looked her friend deep into her eye with worry, before dropping the volume of her voice to whisper the three final words as if they bore a covert top secret.
"...About the baby?"

Bella flicked her hand away in such a carefree manner that it could be easily associated with a far, far less important topic of conversation.

"Nah, Cleo. Don't stress. I was so freaked out about the same thing as you. But, I'm absolutely sure that baby is fine. I didn't know it at the time, but since my pregnancy overlapped with breaking up with

Will, I had a few weekends where I didn't spend much time sober. Heck, I think I accidentally spent three months too long, drinking too much and Allie still came out fine! I think it's probably just an Old Wives Tale or low risk precaution..."

While Bella was prepared with at least a dozen more statistics that my might ease the mother-to-be who struggled with paranoid tendencies, Bella zipped her mouth on the subject after noting the blonde who had walked back into the large, noisy and crowded room, looking for the table that she had left around twenty minutes earlier.

It was immediately notable that Rikki looked completely less enthralled by her fianc  than she did when she had exited the room earlier in the night as she returned to the seat with her two closest friends.

"Don't get me wrong. I love Zane. However, I really cannot see a wedding coming together at this rate. And if it does, the nuptials are going to happen in two different continents and two very different times of the year. We have not made one mutual decision, which we both agree on, since deciding to get married! Doesn't that sort of defeat the purpose?!"

"At least Zane has an opinion, Rikki!" Cleo laughed, recalling her wedding planning from years earlier. "Wedding planning with Lewis consisted of his three favourite sayings... 'You choose', 'I'm happy if you're happy' or 'I'll go along with whatever you decide'..."

Rikki rolled her eyes. "At this stage, I'm seriously considering trading Zane in for an opinion-less puppet! Brainstorming and just verbalizing our ideas for it is hard enough! Locking in decisions is going to be completely unbearable..."

"Boys... gotta love them. Can't live them, and you can't shoot them!" Bella exclaimed, with just as much frustration as Rikki and Cleo.

Out of curiosity, Rikki questioned the comment that seemed out of character after coming from a single woman. "Which boy's got you so worked up?"

"Will... Last night he put the possibility of a relationship out there again."

"And?!" Rikki and Cleo quickly questioned, appearing to be bursting at the same seams, for the answer and resolution as to how this story was going to end.

"I told him I'd think about it..." Bella replied sheepishly, hiding away from the spotlight of attention as she paid more attention to her drink than what she had all night. "I'm just trying to think of the nicest way to say no."

The blonde's two completely different friend's obviously shared a like-mind as they looked at each other, exchanging a look and requiring no words to know they were on the same train of thought.

"You'll think about it? You seriously told him _that_?! You two are almost already like a couple again, Bella!" Rikki lectured with a sincere seriousness over the matter.

Bella's head darted up from her drink out of shock. It wasn't that Bella was surprised that Rikki was all for Will's idea, given the fact that it would mean a hook up between two of her closest friends, which was something that she had made no secret of wanting. However, after hearing the last comment that her friend made was what had Bella shell-shocked.

"I have to agree with Rikki there, Bella..." Cleo said cautiously, intervening with a response that Bella was expecting to receive from the other girl more. "You should listen to and see the way that you and Will talk about each other and act around one another. If I didn't know better and if you just added a few kisses in there, I wouldn't know whether you were a couple or just friends..."

"Exactly! At first whenever the two of you would talk about each other it would always be '_Will and I_' or ' _me and Bella_', very formal, but just recently, it's been turning into '_us's_' and '_we's_'... Not to mention blind Freddy can see all the intimate little moments you two have" Rikki added to Bella who just sat there absorbing the information that both of her friends were feeding her, even though she wouldn't have minded going without knowing it.

Even after both of her friends stated their cases against her, awaiting her defensive comments in reply, the woman who never struggled with what to say didn't know _what_ to say and simply sat there trying to process the words with her feelings and priorities. If Bella could be rendered speechless, then there truly can be a first time for everything.

"Oh I don't know! We are in such an awesome place with balancing any awkwardness, while making sure that Allie's our number one priority! We've just spent years working and trying so hard to de-relationship and detach ourselves from any awkward moments between us as exes in order to focus Allie. That's been working so well!"

"But you still have feelings for Will, don't you?" Rikki asked softer, with more sensitivity than her earlier drilling as she had tried to labour the point of a romantic reunion between the former lovers.

"I think I will always have _some_ degree of feelings for him, but a relationship isn't the focus or the most important thing. _Our_ feelings have to be pushed to the side. Allie's at an age where she'd been more alert and unsettled if we did try and fail. Besides, I feel like I've developed such a good friendship with Will that if we got together and broke up again, it would be like losing a best friend."

"Normally, Bella, I would completely understand and side with what you are saying. I'm all for security and not stirring the pot if things are good. But, really, life is way, way too short. That's what the Guillain-Barré made me realize when I worried that I was going to lose Lewis. In a way, life is too short to even be sensible and safe, when there is the potential that the alternative is more than worth it..."

* * *

><p>"Have a good night?" Will asked as he scooped Allie off the lounge, in order to return her to her bed with such an ease - despite the young girl's dangling arms, legs and hair that had succumb to sleep and care. Despite both of her parent's belief that her routine would be uninterrupted by the boys night hosted in Will and Bella's shared hotel room, Will and the other boys quickly learnt that each and every time she was put in bed and told to sleep, she was going to keep boomeranging back out to her father, announcing that she couldn't sleep, but that she wanted to be with him and the other boys instead.<p>

On the other side of the room, Bella was kicking off her stilettos, cursing the decision that she had made at the beginning of the night, as the aches and blisters shone through. Despite any amount of alcohol that had been consumed over the evening that may have numbed the pain, her sore feet won out.

"Yeah it was really lovely. It was lots of fun chatting and dancing and drinking, you know...All the good stuff."

Will nodded in understanding. "Glad to hear it. Despite the dampener of us having to conform to having a 'G-rated' audience member with us for most of the night, our boy's night went off reasonably well too."

Hobbling across the room from her painful feet, Bella laughed at Will's comment through the pain of grimacing with each step that she took, before collapsing on the lounge with a sigh of relief.

"Do you need a foot massage, softy?!" Will joked teasingly as he joined her on the lounge which was all that his own tired body could manage and carry him to at this time of night. Well, morning.

It was only a small thing. A small gesture and small joke. However, Bella knew that as much as he was using it as a joke, she knew Will well enough to know that he wouldn't hesitate massaging her sweaty, blistered soles that few people would dare to touch on another person. It was just Will, the person he was and it was a reminder of one of the many qualities that she had fallen in love with in the man in the first place.

"You do realize it's all or nothing, don't you?"

"What?" Will asked with a half-laugh, feeling a little stunned and confused, as though he had missed a piece of the conversation that he was half of. He couldn't be blamed though, considering that Bella not only didn't answer the question he had been expecting an answer to, but also changed the topic with no warning at all.

The a-little- too-intoxicated Bella took a deep breath, preparing to get the long winded explanation out, with all the run-on-sentences you could imagine. Even Will knew what he had to be preparing his ears for at the breath far deeper than any normal one.

"If we gave us and a relationship a second shot, you do know that it's an all or nothing sort of thing, right? Even when it's not so rosy, you and I are going to have to force ourselves pretty hard to

commit to each other and make a relationship work for Allie. There is absolutely no room for a casual relationship between you and I anymore because there is nothing 'casual' about you and I sharing a daughter, when every decision you and I make will be decisions and outcomes that Allie will have to share too. If we work out, she'll reap the blessings of having a family, but if we don't then she'll have to experience what it's like to truly be a unified family, but then have that taken away from her. It's not just a bit of fun and mucking around. If you're just after a bit of no-strings fun, you've come to the wrong place. "

Bella concluded her speech with another deep breath. Her ability to breathe underwater had only ever improved her ability to talk non-stop, without taking a breath for several minutes at a time.

Meanwhile, Will tried to process and translate what Bella had said, as well as the prompt or message behind it.

"Wait. So do you mean that you want to try again? You want to give us another go?"

"I think so... No, it's just going to end badly... Maybe... Oh forget it, yes I do" Bella replied, changing her mind every few seconds after a very bipolar moment amongst her head versus heart battle and indecision.

If it was thought that Bella was confused, Will was double that as he tried to keep up with his heart, both rising and falling amongst her own changes of opinion and heart.

Knowing that he had to either slow or stop the mind and mouth that was working in overdrive, Will took the hands of the babbling blonde that were flying here, there and everywhere as she spoke and took her hands into his own to try and calm her, or force her to stop.

"Bella. Calm down. Listen to me. From the bits and pieces I can gather that you are saying, I do know and completely understand what I'm getting myself into. I wouldn't want to risk ruining our friendship and balance we've got with Allie if I thought for even just a second that we weren't ready to try again or that I wasn't ready for 'all or nothing' or no in-betweens, I wouldn't consider risking it."

Bella seemed even more startled after listening to Will speak than she had when her decision changed back and forth undecidedly.

"But Allie-"

Will cut Bella off before she could think of any more excuses or possibilities that would outweigh and create anymore difficulty to the decision that the couple were discussing and impending to make a decision on.

"-But Allie will love her parents together, don't you think? She already loves it on the days that the three of us spend together so if it's like that even more, she'll be one happy kid. And if you're worried about us not working out, just remember if we've been managing well enough to work together and raise a kid, then don't you

think keeping a relationship together will be a walk in the park? We've obviously got something pretty strong going for us if even after so many years we're being drawn back together..."

Will waited for the protest, the 'but', the 'what if' that he had no doubt that Bella was working on to verbalize her uncertainties, but a minute passed without one word.

"What? No objection?"

Bella hesitated, before slowly beginning to shake her head wordlessly for once.

"Good..." Will added, answering his own question that he had posed to Bella which she hadn't formed a reply for.

Releasing their hands from one another's, Will scooted closer to Bella on the lounge, closing the gap between them by slowly, ever so slowly, moving closer and closer to Bella, while she was already occupied with reclining herself a little further back horizontally on the lounge they were sharing.

"Slow. We have to take this really slow" she whispered, the first words she could manage and the best attempt she could make at fighting the inevitable. However, it was too late and the inevitable was moving slowly but surely moving closer and closer to her... The inevitable that was pressing his lips against hers, gently, as they each savoured the moment for the first time in almost five years.

* * *

><p>So. So far, we have a baby on the way, a rekindled relationship and a pending marriage. Sydney's about to bring one more surprise into these character's life in next chapter. Any guesses?

**I'm dying to hear all about your thoughts, feelings, good parts, bad parts, just absolutely anything that you can talk about in a review. I think I'll stick another chapter up when I get to 35 reviews - group effort guys, don't wait for others to pitch in! **

Next chapter: Its the chapter of struggles as Zane struggles with motivating Rikki with wedding planning, Bella and Will struggle with concealing their relationship from Allie and Cleo struggles with telling Lewis about the baby. But before the chapter's over, one hell of a bombshell will be dropped...

5. From This Moment Forward

**Damn, I have the best reviewers. Ever. You guys way exceeded the number of reviews I thought I'd get, I'm under a week, too! What a lovely surprise, thank you! **

On a side note, we start off in the beautiful Palm Beach and Boat House for this one. I miss that place, ugh. And the food, like seriously, if you ever get the chance to eat there, do it. I have eaten so many hot chips and fish before in my life over summer's, but these were hands-down the best I have eaten... **I didn't get much

sleep last night, so I**** must be tired to be raving on about chips. Anyway, excuse me!**

Enjoy the chapter!

* * *

><p>Chapter Five â€" From This Moment Forward

The newly engaged couple had decided the day before to take a trip out and go out for breakfast at the _Boat House_ at Palm Beach that Zane's aunty had drilled into him as a recommendation. Apparently it was _that_ spectacular that she would shun her nephew had he pass the border from New South Wales over into Queensland again without paying the place a visit.

So, there bright and early, Zane and Rikki found themselves sitting on the decking and waiting for their breakfast orders with the spectacular backdrop overlooking the Barrenjoey bay, pier and boats.

Zane had all of a sudden become a morning person as he breathed in the breezy fresh air, while across the table from him, Rikki was trying to subtly hide her hangover as she skulled morning-after beverages while hiding behind the largest pair of sunglasses she owned.

"Isn't it a beautiful day?" Zane mused optimistically and about as out of character he could get.

Rikki rolled her eyes, taking a few seconds to realize he wouldn't be able to see the action behind the dark of the sunglasses and since he was looking away from her. Instead, she added to her disagreement over his question with a scoff.

"It's too bright. It's too early. It's too breezy. It's too warm. Oh and we got up nice and early to waste the rest of our day arguing over wedding venue suggestions and looking at what engagement party invitations Sydney has to offer. Shall I go on?"

"Joy kill..." Zane muttered to himself. "Way to ruin the moment. Aren't we supposed to be enjoying this? All of this? Romantic breakfasts... Premium cafes... Planning our wedding..."

Rikki simply shrugged, turning her head away from Zane and into the direction of the shadiest part of the deck, away from as much light as possible.

"See? That" Zane added, gesturing to her position and body language facing away, but more so referring to her current lack of care. "I'm pretty sure you're supposed to care about our _wedding_!"

"I tried caring. But you cared too... on a very different wavelength to everything I cared about. We got absolutely nowhere. It's deflating."

Zane's once-off bright and chirpy attitude that he had began the day with quickly faded as he looked out to the view of the bay once again. Both sat in silence until a waitress came out just short of reaching a ten minute mark of since their last words to each other

had been uttered, placing the plates of food in front of the two, setting a thought and idea into Zane's head in the mean time.

"What?" Rikki asked groggily, sounding annoyed as she noticed the light that flooded her fianc s face. She knew he got excited about food, but the look on his face was even a little too excessive for that.

A smirk spread across Zane's face as his distraction from what had crossed his mind subsided enough for him to snatch up his cutlery and hoe into his breakfast.

"I think I have an idea. Eat up. Get ready. I've got an idea, and if this works out, we've got a big day ahead of us."

* * *

><p>"Good morning" Lewis greeted, pressing a kiss to his wife's hair as she snuggled a little closer to his bare chest.<p>

"Do you need me to shut the curtains for you after your big night last night?" the blonde added as a joke, referring to the window furnishings that he had opened upon waking up hours ago, before deciding to go back to bed until Cleo woke.

Beside Lewis, Cleo shook her head proudly.

"No you do not! I'm clean and completely sober. Not a single drop of alcohol for me last night. Be proud!"

Lewis laughed. While Cleo was making it out to be some massive feat, he knew that all she would only ever have would be one, or two at the max, drinks at any time, no matter the occasion.

"You continue to surprise me, woman! What? Is it 'Dry July' or something?!"

"No..." Cleo smiled, her mind beginning to trail off onto another path that she knew that she could lead the conversation on, before a sense of fear from the unknown kicked in and she hesitantly strayed from that subject for the time being.

The couple cuddled and snuggled in silence for a while, enjoying the relaxed morning in bed compared to some of their early starts and late nights to make the most of every minute of the group's holiday.

Lewis positively felt as though he was floating around in heaven, while Cleo's head that was resting on her husband's chest was holding her back a little bit with the weight of the secret that she carried in the back of her mind uncomfortably.

"Lewis? Are you in a good mood?"

Lewis laughed, wondering if the obscure query was a trick question, when he had assumed that Cleo was just as happy as he was lying there in the present stress-free, relaxed and idyllic moment.

"Uh... Yeah I am... Reasonably. Why?" Lewis responded hesitantly,

feeling a combination of confused and concerned as to what his answer to the highly unusual question was going to prompt.

Cleo let out a short but sharp exhaled blow of air, trying to gather the courage to get the words out that seemed almost impossible to say to the person she was closest to out of any other person in the world, and the man she had loved more than she had loved any other person.

"Good. I think. I figure it's probably good that you're in the best frame of mind and as comfortable as possible. Oh gosh, maybe not. You would know what the chances are of it being so or not. Maybe it's just going to bring your mood down and you'll hate me and this even more-" Cleo blabbed, sharing her concerns verbally as she avoided saying what Lewis was becoming more and more puzzled over as every minute passed.

"Cleo? Can you just tell me what's going on? Leave the theorizing to me. But at this rate, I might hate you if you don't explain before I lose my mind wondering."

Despite her previous longwinded explanations of her fears, when it came to the crunch, Cleo proved herself efficient, spitting a question out almost as soon as Lewis told her to.

"What do you think about us having a baby?"

Lewis gave another funny look. He had no idea where his wife's weird questions were coming from, especially the latest one, unless she had been struck with a form of amnesia or selective memory loss. The question and the topic was no strange concept to the couple. He'd lost count the number of times they had ever talked about kids or their plans for the future... Be it how many pets they'd have or children's name for their ideal plan of having two sons and a daughter in time.

Fortunately, with her view of the rest of the room from resting her head on her husband's chest and ribcage area, Cleo was unable to see Lewis's funny look. Had she seen the look, it had a very likely chance of hindering her from releasing her hold on the rest of the question.

"... In like 7 or 8 months time?"

It did not take a genius, or in this case, a scientist to do the math on what Cleo was trying to delicately allude to, in contrast to and by referring to the normal 9 month gestational period of humans.

However, for a genius, Lewis was struck dumb. Completely. Was a pregnancy five months? Nine months? Twelve months? What exactly was Cleo saying? Did she want a baby soon, or would there be a baby soon?

All common sense, all intelligence and IQ flew out of the window with Cleo's last question as Lewis remained silent for way too long.

"Lewis?" Cleo prompted softly, losing her confidence and control of her screwed-up hormones that were fighting to dominate in the

moment.

"Sorry. Like, do you mean you're pregnant, Cleo?"

Cleo nodded at the question, not speaking in fear that she would burst into tears. She was too distraught to even move from her position, while she wished that the bed would swallow her up right that second and teleport her to anywhere but there in that moment.

The answer sunk in as Lewis's understanding of what she was saying set in.

"We're having a baby?! Us, Cleo... You and me?!"

He sprung into action and excitement, quickly bolting up in bed, pulling along with him his wife. He threw his arms around her even more as the two sat up in bed, in an embrace with bed sheets flying and tangling everywhere from the sudden and erratic movements.

"You're okay with it?" Cleo confirmed, feeling her heart melt just a little as she witnessed the proud beam on Lewis's lips as he nodded at her question.

"Of course, Cleo. This is amazing news. I completely wasn't expecting it, but I'm more than happy! I'm pumped! You know I've always wanted kids and when I was hospitalized with Guillain Barré, when I barely knew anything about what I had, that was my one big fear... that we'd never be able to have kids."

Cleo just smiled. That's all she felt as though she could muster up in the present moment, feeling joyously overwhelmed. She had thought up close to five hundred different ways that Lewis could react badly to her news, but then again her negativity was her fault she realized; her fault for forgetting who her husband is and the sort of man that she had married.

"I love you Lewis" Cleo said as she finally brought herself to speak again from the silence the couple were enjoying in the exciting moment and tight embrace with each other as Lewis slowly held her tighter and tighter, and closer and closer.

"I love you too. So, very much, Cleo... I always have."

Lewis pressed a kiss to the very top of the brunette locks that were conveniently placed directly in front of his head. Cleo's confidence (or hormones) must have been on the increase as she rolled over from her position against him, turning over from her new position, arms rested on him as she lay on her occupied stomach to enable her to be able to kiss her husband from their embrace as deeply and as lovingly as she could.

* * *

><p>Two whispers and a familiar giggle did the trick to awaken Bella from her slumber, from across the other end of the open-area hotel room.<p>

Bella sat up in bed to catch a hazy glimpse and see the two

generating the noises that had been intended to be quiet, yet were loud enough to wake her.

"What are you two conspiring over there?" Bella questioned as she tried to work out what exactly was going on. Across the room, Will was sitting sans-shirt as Allie circled him around the chair, stopping for a moment and appearing to focus intently for a few seconds before continuing to a different position somewhere else near Will and the chair.

Dragging herself out of bed, she found an answer to her unanswered questions as she neared the father and daughter.

Getting closer, she realized that Allie was carrying around a handful of textas with her, along with the odd pencil or butterfly sticker. The few she carried were taken from a whole array and collection that were sprawled out over the table.

Bella had heard of living art before, using people as the subject of art pieces... However, never before had she come across the concept of using the person as the canvas. That was just what Allie was doing to Will.

The young father's shoulders and arms were crowded with clusters of butterfly stickers, while his bare abdomen had a few scrawls of texta, especially of the pink and purple variety, near his belly button and a few scribbles around his chest. The artist was now concentrating on decorating her father's back with what appeared to be a four-year-olds version of a rainbow, a flower, a love heart and a group of stick figures.

"So is paper too mainstream for you two now or something?"

"Hi mummy... Doesn't daddy look beautiful now?!" the tot proudly declared upon noticing her mother's presence.

Bella laughed at her daughter's complete and total oblivious innocence.

"He does!" Bella agreed with an amusement Will was clearly unimpressed with, just as she ruffled the man's hair who was at the perfect level to reach from his shortened height on the seat. "You've made him look very pretty now, A. I think he should go and flaunt it off at the beach."

The younger girl agreed with a serious nod, before returning her concentration to putting in the best effort she could as she drew on her dad.

The three continued on separately, with Bella rustling through the fridge for something to jump out of her as the perfect option to settle her hunger. Will continued sitting patiently until his daughter was content with her artwork. And meanwhile, Allie was proving herself to be quite the little Picasso and quite a perfectionist by trying to get the swirls she was drawing in perfect colour-coordination with the nearby squiggly lines.

"Did you feed her this morning?" Bella asked the other adult, just ensuring that he hadn't forgotten one of the fundamental parenting basics and that their daughter wasn't going around on an empty

stomach.

Will nodded at the question, while trying to move as little as possible to risk the wrath of Allie. Surprisingly, it was her who seemed to completely forget about the task at hand as she let out a little gasp, before clapping both hands over her mouth as though to stop something falling out.

At the little girl's unanticipated action, Will simply laughed as though he knew exactly what had prompted it, while Bella didn't think she could get any more confused if she tried.

"What's going on?"

"I couldn't find much for us to eat in here and didn't want to make too much noise while you were sleeping, so I took Allie out for a nice breakfast. As a joke, I told her not to say anything to you because you'd be jealous... I just love how kids blow it out of proportion and treat it like it's the sacred secret!"

Bella laughed a little at what Allie had deemed so secretive. It was a relief that, while unlikely, as a mother she couldn't help but fear that Allie's secrecy had surrounded the fact that Will had accidentally fed her off-milk or shampoo or something stupid like that and told their daughter not to tell her mother.

Allie became distracted from decorating Will after announcing to her parent's that her puppy, elephant and tiger were waking up, as she scurried off to greet her stuffed-animal friends.

"Sit down, I want to show you something" Will whispered to Bella, while keeping an eye on Allie while she slowly removed the bed sheets from her three toys, giving them a cuddle and talking to them about their dreams.

Bella fell for the trap. As soon as she sat down on the next closest seat which Will had gestured to, he immediately kissed her as fast as he could, for as long as he could before their daughter would decide to return to tattooing her father.

"Will!" Bella warned with a hiss after the first round of kissing use hadn't argued with, until she caught up to speed with the early-morning startling. "Allie will see us! She's right over there. I thought we weren't going to explain anything to her until we've smoothed it out a little!"

Will shrugged as though in that moment he couldn't care in the slightest as to what he had previously said. The temptation to make the most of the moment and seize the brief chance they had while their daughter was distracted was clearly the stronger pull.

As if by command, Allie came hurrying back over to her parents, proudly bringing her tiger, puppy and elephant toys over in a handful that she struggled with before she dropped them all beside her father's chair.

"They want to watch me make daddy pretty" she announced as she returned to selecting her textas and stickers for round two of the embellishment.

"Hear that Will? Apparently you need help to be made to look pretty" Bella giggled teasingly.

While the preschooler was preoccupied with her activity, Will again tried to subtly seize the moment of her inattention, grabbing Bella's nearby hand with a squeeze.

Bella appreciated the small display of affection, but her mind was short-circuited to the possibility of Allie noticing, raising questions and potentially becoming far more attached to the idea of her parent's newly rekindled relationship than she should be at this early stage.

"No Will" Bella whispered in a hushed, but firm tone as she separated their hands, but not with any ease. It was quite the role reversal for the couple. Five years ago, it would have been Bella pushing the envelope, seeing how far she could flirt with Will and how flirtatious she could be in inappropriate situations before he'd muster up the strength to tell her not to. Usually, it was Will who was the more conservative half of the couple.

"Not yet. Not here. Slow and steady, remember?"

* * *

><p>While the group of friends who had travelled south together on the trip and had spent almost twenty-four hours a day with one another while they holidayed around the city together to hit every possible tourist attraction as a group, today had been a day where they'd begun to separate. Instead, they enjoyed the final day before returning home in smaller groups with either their partner's or as a dysfunctional family.<p>

This was no different for Rikki and Zane who had hot-footed it down from Palm Beach early in the day, back through the Northern Beaches to hit the city again as they got as many plans in place to implement their spontaneous decision.

The two had been out all day and despite being beyond exhausted, there was an excitement and radiance that wasn't going to let their physical tiredness affect their excitement.

In a cluster of laughs and giggles and kisses and squeezes, Zane and Rikki slowly made their way through the lobby and up the elevator to eventually reach the destination of their hotel room.

Instead of proceeding into the room as he had every other time that he had reached the same door of his temporary residence, Zane continued inside a little differently today.

After a zap of the key card, the door opened to the couple's hotel room, where Zane used his foot as a door wedge while swiftly wrapping his arms around the waist of the petite blonde, pulling her into the air as he used a force of strength to lift her into his arms, conveniently and suitably, bridal-style.

"Congratulations Mrs. Bennett."

* * *

><p>Well, well, well... Who saw that one coming? Judging by the reviews that were left, no one guessed it amongst the other guesses so I hope I delivered with a good surprise guys! And what is every one's thoughts on the Zikki marriage? Was their impulsive decision to elope away from impossible wedding plans romantic, or reckless?

****This marked the last chapter in Sydney... Chapter 6 everyone is back to the Gold Coast where reality is going to start hitting for the character's lives that are otherwise looking pretty rosy. Don't get too used to it. ****

****On a side note. I'm not married nor engaged, so I have nooooo idea what the marriage laws are here. I think you need to give 30/31 days notices, but I don't know if that applies for a registry-marriage. For the sake of this storyline, that notice is only applicable for ceremony weddings.****

****Lucky number 52 reviews for a new chapter! ****

****Next chapter: Rikki and Zane reveal their news, while we get a brand new P.O.V!****

6. The Wedding

****Thank you to all of my lovely reviewers and their wonderful words on my last chapter! I'm glad that most of you seemed to like the eloping idea as much as I did. Honestly, I tried to envision a wedding for Zikki originally for later in the story, but to me it just wasn't them. A reckless and spontaneous decision on the other hand, that seemed to fit the brief far more! ****

****Enjoy the chapter and don't forget to let me know what you thought!****

* * *

><p>Chapter Six â€" The Wedding

All good things come to an end...Unfortunately.

That was the truth and reality that all six of the adults were coming to a realization of in the conclusion and aftermath of the summer holiday interstate.

On the plane home each of the adults were all a little different to when they had left, just a week earlier.

Cleo and Lewis were now aware of what was growing in Cleo and how that little person who they guessed was not yet the size of a jellybean was going to change their lives forever.

Rikki and Zane had not only progressed from being one another's boyfriend and girlfriend, to becoming engaged, to now being husband and wife, still obliviously to their friends.

Meanwhile, Bella and Will were completely absorbed by the hope of their new relationship, hidden from their friends and their daughter.

In a way, Sydney had changed every single one of those people and by the time they reached the airport in Coolangatta again, their lives had changed from the people who boarded the plane at the same location a week earlier.

* * *

><p>As the last hurrah to conclude their trip and to drop their bombshell, Rikki and Zane had coordinated and arranged a final group dinner at the classy Salt _Grill,_ in Surfers Paradise for the evening that they returned home.

Despite everyone going their separate ways to discard their suitcases and luggage at their consecutive homes and to get dressed up again for dinner, the group all met up again within a few hours of seeing each other last.

While Tam, who had volunteered to stay in Queensland and housesit for the others since she didn't think she could afford the trip, had evidently stayed home from the group holiday, it was still a given that Rikki would invite her sister to the dinner where her and Zane were planning on announcing their bombshell to their nearest and dearest that instead of preparing to become Mr. & Mrs. Bennett, that that ship had actually already sailed...

As the group eventually filtered in to the fine dining restaurant, no one noticed that Zane's left hand remained in his pocket, or under the table for the majority of the time. Similarly, no one else made note of the fact that Rikki's would intentionally find its way affectionately behind Zane's back or clasped within her right hand, ensuring a certain addition to her first piece of jewellery was concealed.

As the evening truly began there was all sorts of questions and chatter. It ranged from Tam asking how the group's flights home had been, to Lewis lecturing Will for not chewing gum as he had recommended to him on the way down in between his grumbles over his blocked ears, to the girls comparing how far over the luggage weight limit they had gone due to their unrestrained and uncontrollable shopping habits.

The small talk and light-hearted conversation was driving Rikki up the wall. Her tongue began to feel as though it was burning, while it politely contained her news and her excitement that she could not wait to share.

Zane could feel and sense his wife's anticipation, agitation and rapidly fading patience. Her twitching and restless fidgeting was increasing, as was the frequency of her small and almost unnoticeable eye rolls. He could tell that she had almost reached her threshold and waited until she burst at the seams erratically.

"I love all of you, but you're a bunch of chatterboxes! Can you shut up just for a minute or even just long enough for Zane and I to tell you that we got married?!"

For a bundle of people that had just been accused of being un-relentless chatterboxes, not one person made a single noise or moved a single muscle. That was excluding Allie who examined the

adults around her that seemed to have been instantaneously paused after they heard and processed the words that Rikki had dropped. One of the strangest parts of it was that it was said in the same manner as she would use to announce that she would be back in a few moments after a bathroom break.

Lewis was the first to break free of the stun induced by the announcement.

"Wow... Congratulations guys! When did that happen?"

"The day after us girls went out that night. Zane was 'inspired' by the idea over breakfast when went up to Palm Beach, so we raced back to the city. Then we were husband and wife in the registry office by five that afternoon!"

There was another small break of silence while it seemed as though the group were analysing and registering every piece of information that was still in the process of explaining the massive news that they had been told.

"So what made you elope?" Bella questioned intriguingly. "I love a good wedding!"

"Hey! What happened to me being best man?" Will fired in realization at Zane in particular.

"Don't go thinking I'm going to forgive you that easily, but tell us the details! Did you do anything special for the day then?!" Cleo asked equally desperate as she was inquisitive.

Just as Rikki had not-so subtly implied that her friend's would rarely stop talking for very long, they unknowingly proved her point once again in their curiosity.

"Well, we were getting absolutely nowhere with wedding planning and couldn't really think of any mediums or compromises of what we would both be happy with. It was sort of causing more trouble and disagreements than something as exciting planning our wedding should! Plus, I'm _sooo_ sorry Will, but we figured it was ****our**** day and it was more important for ****us**** to be happy."

Cleo nodded enthusiastically at the explanation that Rikki had given to her friends, before informing her that it hadn't been enough to suffice.

"More details! Did you get a wedding dress? Have you got pictures?!"

"We basically managed to get everything together in just over an hour around the Pitt Street Mall. I found a really simple but elegant white dress at _Zara_, we found a little Arcade to choose and buy our wedding bands, and fortunately I was having a good hair day, so I just got my makeup done at a little _Vani-T_ stall in the mall. Then we picked up a bunch of flowers from the first florist we saw and had dinner at the Opera House after we were married. It was absolutely perfect."

_Tam's POV: _

I couldn't escape the gushing that seemed to be coming from every direction around me.

The girl's squeals were too loud.

The boy's discussion was too painful.

The highly regarded and sought after aromas of the fine dining experience suddenly churned through my stomach with difficulty.

The distant and scattered noises of porcelain plates and silver cutlery being used or placed on the glass tables rippled through my ears like an echo.

The _Salt_ _Grill_ was becoming too salty for my liking as the salt of the tears clutching to my tear ducts and the corner of my eyes came closer and closer to freedom when they would release themselves on my cheeks.

However, despite the sensory overload that was becoming far more overwhelming with every passing moment, it was the pain and ache in my heart that hurt the most.

I knew that I wanted and needed to slip out of the room and escape the table, _fast_. _I took the moment that Cleo and Bella were examining and comparing my sister's engagement ring with her wedding ring and when Zane seemed intent on answering whatever questions Will was grilling him while Lewis sat in amusement, to do so and flee.

As I escaped the inside of the restaurant, the emotions of everyone else's happiness and excitement counteracted by my personal sadness, it felt like I could almost feel some of the pressure blow away with fresh air of the beachside wind.

I could take the deep breath I really needed to inhale. I could let a crack through my infallible smile. I could release a hold on my expression and excitement that I had plastered on to conceal my true feelings with a faux happiness while I was all on my own, alone.

So I'd thought.

I hadn't heard the footsteps. I hadn't noticed that someone else had seen me slip out and I didn't know that somebody else had followed me outside. I didn't know until I heard the small whisper.

"Aunty Tam?"

"Allie. What are you doing out here hunnie? You better go back to your mum and dad before they notice you're missing."

The four year old didn't answer my question, nor did she obey my instruction. Instead, she tried to imitate the position that even I wasn't aware I was in, holding onto the pole that overlooked the beautiful Surfer's Paradise beach and even more distantly outstretched ocean as she tried to reach up to and clutch onto the handlebars that acted as a barrier from free-falling on the balcony.

"It was boring. I didn't know what was happening. Mummy and daddy were 'stracted and everyone was really happy. But you look

sad."

"They're just talking about how Uncle Zane and Aunty Rikki got married."

I looked down to the far smaller blonde girl beside me as puzzlement swept across the expressive young girl's face.

"Married? But weddings make people happy in the movies! Except when the baddies want to stop a wedding" the preschooler paused, giving me an accusing look that I didn't even know was possible for a girl of her age before she continued speaking. "Did **you** want to marry Uncle Zane first?"

"No Allie..." I trailed off, unable to resist a laugh that had been completely induced by the four year old's innocence at a time that I didn't even think would be possible to laugh during. "Now come on. Let's get you back inside. Thanks for talking to me when you thought I was sad, sweetie."

"It's okay. But I just kinda wanted to look for a playground and then I saw you..."

I laughed at the unfiltered innocence of the child, before I picked her up to avoid any debate or running in the opposite direction from the restaurant we were en-route to re-entering.

"Come on, monkey. Let's get you back to those inattentive parents of yours."

I carried the little girl who I continued to forget was four now, realizing she was probably getting way too big and way too heavy to be carried around.

"Will, Bella! Buy a leash, would you? Your kid got bored and decided to take herself off on a walk."

As I startled the parents from the conversation that they were clearly too deeply engrossed in to even notice that their daughter was no longer by their side, I could have sworn that there was more to their jolt as I called their names from behind, after they hadn't seen us walk in. I could have sworn that there was a flicker of alarm in the look they shared, momentarily, in their surprise while they seemed to inch away from each other more nervously than normal, after having seemed to be sitting closer than normal.

Perhaps Rikki and Zane weren't the only ones hiding a secret (which just so happened to be also known as a marriage) from the trip.

I handed Allie back over to Will as he took over the role of disciplining her as subtly as possible in front of the group from where she stayed sitting on his lap, looking devastated that she was getting told off.

As I returned to my seat and to the group that I had left minutes earlier, I was reminded of my discomfort, my disgust at the others excitement and my hurt over the clear and blatant move that my sister had made with such an important milestone. All it did was once again distinguish just how little her family, how little I, meant to her when it came to the crunch.

In my seat, I realized that I had to thank Allie at some point and that I should sneak the girl a little chocolate Freddo frog one day to make it up to her. She was far easier to talk to outside and to distract me from my hurt at the announcement and she was far easier to genuinely smile at while I needed any and all inspiration to keep smiling... Keep pretending that I was happy, when I wasn't, and to keep pretending that I didn't care that once again I hadn't been included in my sister's life and in the most important day of Rikki's life.

However, something gave me the feeling that I was going to need more than a chat with a four year old and the entertainment that came with watching her or listening to what she had to say. I was going to need a lot more than that to be able to maintain my facade and get through the hell of a night.

* * *

><p>I was planning to expand on this chapter with a few flashbacks, but it just didn't happen. I've been really sick this week and I had no inspiration in the slightest to add to it *****so I figured I'd tackle the less is more approach. I didn't want to add stuff if it just wasn't going to work, but some flashbacks of that day in Sydney MAY happen later down the track in the story. ****

****Ooh and Tam's first POV. What did you think? It felt a bit strange for me to write cause it was quite different to the resilient teenager I'd tried to portray. But, it's all essential for her own upcoming plot.****

****Anyway, let me know anything and everything that you would like to express to me about this chapter. 63 reviews for more. ****

Next chapter: It's a day of firsts for Will and Bella as they reach a monumental day in their daughter's life.

7. A Day Of Firsts

**Another update... less than a week since the last! Thank you so much for your lovely words on the last chapter as always. I have such lovely readers. **

The consensus of the last chapter seemed to be that most people liked the way the announcement was made and that people are feeling sorry for poor Tam. Just like the beginning of her perspectives, it's just the start for her own secrets and her own storyline. **

>

**Enjoy the new chapter! :) **

* * *

><p>Chapter Seven " A Day of Firsts

Bella's POV:

The day had come. The moment of truth...

It wasn't separation anxiety. Well maybe a little. Leaving her was always hard, but never impossible, since Allie lived with Will half the week and with myself the other half? That's not to mention the fact that she'd been babysat by family and friends before too.

However, the beginning of kindergarten felt like a whole other world. A much, much scarier world, too...

Normal mothers and parents worry about their children entering the world of education, setting them up for their next thirteen years of primary and secondary schooling. The problem was that it seemed so unnatural and wrong to leave your son or daughter in the care of another person for up to seven or eight hours a day, in a class filled with 30 or so other children. It almost felt neglectful.

The range and quantity of questions regarding what should have been an easy transition felt endless.

Would Allie be bullied?

Could she stand up for herself?

Or would it be it even worse if she was the bully?

Would she end up with nice teachers?

Was she being sent to the best Kindergarten to allow her and her skills to develop to the best of her ability?

These were all questions that I had no doubt that every 'normal' parent would consider and dwell on over at least a few sleepless nights of worry.

However, when your daughter's a mermaid too, that just really pushes any suppression of nerves over the edge.

The only reason I had allowed her (despite Will's instance that she was the sort of child who would thrive in an educational environment with other kids), was because of my faith in one of Lewis's more recent inventions... The 'Infallible Waterproof M4M Gel' that he had produced on his own, after over a year of research and experiments being tried and tested on each one of us girls many, many times (all the thorough testing had apparently been in the name of the '06 Dance Disaster' I had heard everything about). Over the period of a year, he had managed to perfect a formula that allowed all of us to undertake and participate in any part of life that had previously been prohibited. However, it was expensive and hard for him produce so it was really just used sparingly and not for day-to-day life.

The discussions of schooling, pre-schooling and homeschooling had felt like they had been a topic of discussion between Will and I for months and months. It had felt impossible to find a happy medium between Will's opinion of sending her to Kindy like any other four year old to normalize her life as much as possible while she was a mermaid, and my indignant view against even risking the danger of

exposure from her innocence and all the other possible accidents in childcare.

In the end, Will, with Lewis's flashy invention had won out. He knew me too well and knew how to twist my feelings. He'd used his lack of normal schooling until his final year of high school and his own experiences of that to pull up all the negatives of home schooling until it forced me to say yes to enrolling Allie in Kindergarten.

* * *

><p>"So are we ready to go Missy?"<p>

The four year old who hadn't stopped grinning since I had woken her up this morning nodded enthusiastically, making it regrettably difficult for me as I tried to tie the hair band to the end of her golden, dark blonde locks as I finished plaiting her second piggy tail.

For Allie's first day of Kindergarten at least, Will and I had already planned to meet up and take her in together.

Normally, and every other day, she loved the share house. She loved her father and she loved our mutual friends. However, today was a very different matter.

From the backseat of the car, she had noticed that I hadn't been driving her the way that Will and I had both taken her to see her Kindy over the last few months and since her first pre-entry visit late last year. Knowing that she was being driven to the share house caused nothing but grief as she whined the entire way to our destination, saying that she just wanted me to take her to Kindy.

Sulking, as she walked up the driveway to the house with me, there was only the briefest waiting period before Allie's father and my secret boyfriend opened the door.

"Good morning girls" Will beamed as he opened the door, holding a big thermo flask of what I would assume was coffee.

What I didn't know was whether the smile was induced more from our presence, or from his gratitude towards the beverage at an hour that the former diver had become unaccustomed to waking in time for, since giving up waking at manically-early hours.

"Bella? What did you do with Allie?"

I rolled my eyes at the corny direction I could perceive the conversation being taken, for the sake of our child.

Waving her hand around from her position standing beside me, Allie evidently didn't look any more amused than she had throughout her annoyance on the drive just minutes earlier.

"I'm here, Daddy!"

"No... No you can't be!" Will exclaimed, goofily looking around and out passed us towards the front yard. "You're far too much of a big girl to be my little Allie!"

"But it IS me, daddy!"

After Allie confirmed her father's completely feigned suspicions, she cracked a smile and even a little giggle as Will's facade faded. I watched as he proceeded to pick up Allie with his free arm and placed a kiss to her hair in one swift motion.

"I guess you're right. So are you already for your first day as a big kindy girl, sweetheart?"

My four-year-olds enthusiasm and excitement was undeniable. There was no hiding her proud, beaming smile as her golden braids bounced all over the place with her nod.

"I am! Are you coming to kindy with me and mummy?! I can show you my special kindy-girl Frozen bag and my princess lunchbox!"

"Of course Allie" Will smiled with a nod at our little girl whose face lit up with even more excitement. "Now should we get this show on the road? You don't want to be late for your first day of Kindy, now, do you Madam?"

Without saying another word, Allie bolted to the car we had arrived in, far more excited than I was feeling at the prospect of what felt like sending my baby girl into the big bad world. Unfortunately, that moment was nearing closer and closer with every second that ticked on towards 9 AM...

* * *

><p>Walking out of the childproofed doors of the Helensvale Koala Kindy Kindergarten, I had to battle the sensation of sick-to-my-stomach nervousness over leaving my little girl (who hadn't even realized we were departing) in the care of total strangers.

Looking behind me, through the free space on the glass windows that didn't hold four year olds art and craft, I could see my daughter giggling happily as she appeared to be sharing stories and a few books with her 'best friend' who she had met barely five minutes ago.

Allie was fine. Being the little social butterfly she is, my daughter was completely in her element as she waltzed and danced around the room, revelling in other kids giggles.

Will was fine. The father of the girl we were leaving behind for a matter of hours didn't look any different or any less chilled than normal. If I didn't know better, you could easily mistake his apparent relaxed attitude walking out of the Kindergarten as walking out of a supermarket he had visited a thousand times before.

I however, was not so fine. Allie wasn't even a hundred metres away from me yet. Will and I hadn't even left the Kindergarten and yet, I could feel all the emotion and nervousness bubbling away inside of me, thinking of every scenario that could go wrong.

"Do you think we got enough pictures of her this morning? I don't want to look back in a few years and regret that I should have taken

more."

Will sighed as he took my hand, sounding a little bored, just like he had at the time.

"Bella... I think 100 photos of Allie from every single angle _and_ with every combination of the three of us is more than enough."

I ignored the reply that hardly aided my mind that was running into overdrive, moving onto more of my worries instead.

"And she seems too little for us to just leave her there! We're doing the right thing, aren't we Will? Do you think she'll miss us? I wonder if they call us if she realizes we left and starts missing us or if they keep her hostage there. Did you get a funny feeling about that brunette little girl sitting across from Allie? I have a bad feeling about her... She seems older than the other kids. I hope she doesn't pick on Allie!"

"Motor mouth, calm down. Worrying isn't going to help."

I scoff in dispute of Will's unwelcome comment.

"Easier said than done... Why do fathers only possess that whole overprotective thing over stupid things, not the important stuff?! Like I saw you eyeing off that little boy who was trying to hold Allie's hand near the playdough! They are 4! Be realistic! Like there is anything to worry about!"

I'd been expecting another dispute I'd have to reply to, like with verbal tennis. However, I was given a smirk and a very unexpected statement.

"I had a feeling you'd be like this, that Allie is all you're going to talk about and think about until pick up... So, I decided to give it a go at distracting you."

I was pleasantly set back by the comment. Oh really? And how do you plan to do that?"

"Well I guess you're going to have to wait and see then, aren't you?"

* * *

><p>Taking the lead, Will took me on the half an hour drive, as we headed west of the coast, the city and most importantly, the Kindergarten that I felt had taken my daughter hostage.<p>

It was easy to pick the location and activity that was being classified as 'Will's distraction' while we weaved through the roads to Tamborine and its beautiful rainforests.

"Now I know that you know the Mako rainforests and all that like the back of your hand, so I thought that maybe we could explore some more? See how different they are to the ones we know well?" Will explained as he parked in the Tambourine Rainforest visitor area, leaving the car to pluck out a few cooler bags and a blanket that did not look as though it should be used for picnic-purposes.

"Sounds good" I reply, offering my hand out to take one of the few cooler bags that Will was carrying. He declined my offer before walking past and ahead of me, leading me on the intentional route through the rainforest floor until we reached a much quieter and flatter spot on the walking track. It really was the perfect locality for a picnic for two.

Setting up did not take long, and while Allie had been in my mind for the entire trip to Tamborine, as well as for the entire walk through to the picnic spot, when we were finally sitting down my mind was briefly snatched away from worrying about my daughter.

As Will pulled out all sorts of gourmet delights from garlic infused buffalo mozzarella bruschettas, to dark chocolate-coated Goji berries to petite sweet and savoury macaroons, it was safe to say that food overruled fear for a few moments. Honestly, I was so blown away by the food that I momentarily questioned whether it was me that he was setting out to attempt to impress, or whether Pete Evans and Manu Feildel were going to walk over at moment for a My Kitchen Rules mobile-Instant-Restaurant round.

"You have done well... Really, really well, Will. This is way too extravagant for a our-daughters-first-day distraction."

Will shuffled a little closer to me on the not-so comfortable blanket, pressing a kiss to my lips to remind me of another reason why he had gone all-out.

"Yeah, well it is Allie's first day and all, but I also figured that it's our first date in a long, long time too."

"Aww... That's true. I didn't think of it like that" I reply as I work to find a more comfortable position on the picnic blanket that was making it hard to do. Eventually, I settled with lying on my stomach, kicking my legs up to hover around above me.

In front of me, with the cooler bags and smorgasbord of food that they had contained in front of us, Will moved to a position identical to mine, before pulling the champagne bottle of Moët out with two champagne flutes. For my sake, one curly, glittery pink straw (clearly one of the many that Will had bought for Allie) that twisted and turned in every direction from the start and end point, from the drink to a mouth, was also extracted from the bag.

"Thank you for this. It's the perfect second, first date and it's the perfect distraction for today... Thanks. But now the problem is that I don't want to have to go back to pick her up" I laugh, becoming more and more relaxed on the uncomfortable picnic blanket.

"Well I just can't win, can I now?" Will chuckled, tilting his head back a little as he shook it.

I smirk, playfully shuffling a little more onto the blanket and a little closer to Will.

"I hope you never expected to be able to" I smile, with a shrug that intentionally further lessened the gap and space between us.

Will obviously picked up on my signal as he too moved closer, moving his hand away from where it had been supporting his head. We both

reduced the gap between us as he tucked a few fingers under my chin, all the while he used the action to gently and slowly guide my mouth to his.

The feeling and sensation of our lips pressing together, massaging one another in a rhythmic unison felt a hundred different types of perfect.

The kiss began soft and slow like a perfect first kiss. Yet despite the excitement and nervousness as though it was a first between us (which it really wasn't, of course), there was the comfort and warmth of our familiarity. It was just a simple rush of fireworks, adrenaline-fuelled excitement and the best sort of happiness surrounding a passion and love.

I hadn't realized how deeply our kiss had intensified, just like I didn't notice when the first round of our kissing had concluded. The two occurrences felt so natural and uncomplicated, that it felt as though we were carrying out two roles that had been written and tailored for us to play out so comfortably.

"Now I know that absence is supposed to make the heart grow fonder, but seriously, kissing you is insane. I can't ever remember it feeling that damn good."

"Well I haven't been taking kissing classes, if that is what you're implying" Will smirked.

I shrug with a subtle grin.

"Pfft. Of course I'm not implying that. I know that I taught you all you know... Just remember that shy guy who thought that a peck could be _ever_ be classified as a 'good kiss'?"

"Yeah, yeah, here we go... I just can't _wait_ to hear what else have you got up your sleeves to tease me about" Will sarcastically mumbled in detest to his teasing.

I laugh at the plentiful memories that had piled up, which came to my mind from the six or so years that I had known Will.

"Like what else? Where should I start? How about that time that you thought that taking me on a double date with _Sophie_ and whatever that guys name was could even potentially turn out to be a good date? Oooh, and let's not forget those totally _sexy_ Blinky Bill pillowcases... And remember when you nipped my lip and accidentally cut it while we were kissing not long after we first got together?! That bled for _so_ long and I had a massive bottom lip for like a week!"

While I was laughing uncontrollably in great amusement of the few memories from many years ago, Will's cheeks appeared redder than I had remembered them being earlier. He appeared as though he wanted to crawl up into a ball and find himself any place but _there_ at that particular time.

"Alright, alright, I get the picture. I'm missing a few brain cells somewhere when it comes to the romance department... Let's change the topic."

"Oh and not to mention remember when you tried to cook me dinner and gave me food poisoning from cross-contamination instead?! Every great date ends in salmonella, right?! You're lucky that I'm even brave enough to eat this food!"

Will shifted a little closer to me again and before I knew it, I was unable to tease him about additional moments that just kept streaming through my mind the more I thought about it, as his lips were pressed to mine once again.

Drifting into the rhythmic duet between our mouths that slowly became a subconscious effort, my mind became freed of worrying about Allie, what the chances were that I would end up with food poisoning today again and any other of my boyfriend's not-so-fine moments as I drifted away and truly absorbed the relaxing moment...

* * *

><p>"So this one's a mermaid for Auntie Rikki and that one's a rainbow for Auntie Tam. I made you a shark, Uncle Zane, but I don't think it's all dry yet so be careful! Daddy, I made you a painting of daddy's house here and mummy, I painted us with daddy for you!" Allie explained to everyone in the room, distributing the appropriate pieces of fresh artwork from her pile of colourful A4 paper with each consecutive explanation.<p>

There was a chorus of 'thanks', 'thank you's' and 'well done's' that flooded the room while my bubbly and extroverted daughter proudly soaked up the attention that was coming her way.

"So how was your first day of Kindy missy? Did you have lots of fun?" Tam asked the four-year-old who was quick to answer.

"It was heaps of fun! I love Kindy!" Allie beamed excitedly. "And guess what?! Daddy said I get to go back there tomorrow too!"

"Speaking of your mummy and daddy, how did you two go? Did you actually manage to leave the Kindy?!" Rikki questioned, using Allie's language, but very much directing her comment at Will and I.

Will laughed a little, earning himself a nudge from my elbow into his chest that was beside me.

"Yeah... I got Bella out of the place, eventually, and we managed to have a good time considering the circumstances."

"Oh yeah? What did you guys get up to? Actually, do I even want to know the answer to that?" Rikki asked, firing the questions at us before ending with a cringe.

A romantic picnic for two would generally be the true and hassle-free answer to give as our reply, but the truth was a little more questionable to our friends who didn't know that our relationship had evolved from the steady friendship we had maintained for the last three years.

That was a part of our deal and decision with taking things extra slow this time around. We didn't want anyone, not our closest friends and not Allie, to know that we were giving a romantic relationship a

second shot, almost six years since we had the first time. We didn't want them to know until we knew or could have confidence in the fact that it was going to work this time. Needless to day though, my confidence in us was growing.

"We just hung out and ate."

"What? For six hours? Whatever you say..." Rikki smirked and I could tell she didn't believe me. Heck, even I didn't believe me!

Thankfully, while I had been born with almost a total inability to lie, it was Will who stepped in and amped up the credibility of the cover story that was lacking believability.

"It wasn't anything too exciting, Rikki. When we dropped her off we realized we hadn't gotten Allie a library book bag so we just went to Robina Mall, picked one up, looks at a few other shops, grabbed a bite to eat and then by that time it was almost time to get her again. The day flew by."

"Damn. I had a boring day. I was hoping there was something juicier to it to spice up my own day..." Rikki confessed honestly, actually appearing a little bitter that we had unknowingly failed her.

In front of me, I stroke Allie's hair as she wiped her eyes in between explaining her day in full to Tam, while us other adults were talking.

"I might get missy home now. I think she is gonna crash from exhaustion by the time she walks in the door. She's had a big day..." I explain, mostly to Rikki and Will.

After informing my reluctant, but overtired daughter of our departure, I hug the girl's goodbye and begin to leave before Will announced that he will walk Allie and I out.

En route from the small journey between the lounge room and the car, Allie's over-tiredness began to crack as she pleaded to stay with the others... Then she begged for Will to carry her and her Kindy bag, then she whined for me to stop talking to Will and then she cried to stay here. The poor thing didn't know what to do with her tiredness.

After having noticed that our daughter appeared to have succumb to sleep or very nearly sleeping in her car seat, I briefly give Will a kiss goodbye, with a smile, just before I moved closer to the door where I would take my spot in the driver's seat of my car.

"Thank you for today. It was really special... for us, just as much for Allie."

* * *

><p>Hope you guys loved the new chapter. Would love your thoughts on it... Anything remotely to do with the chapter, Wella, Allie or 'Wellie' (haha) and their day of firsts. Do you think they should have sent her to Kindy?

At least 73 reviews for more please :)

****Next chapter: Cleo and Lewis make decisions regarding their child, while Lewis has an irrational freakout... '_Lewis style_'.****

8. Damage Control

****Hey guys. Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter. Very sorry that this one has taken so long to post... Was hoping to have this up a lot earlier, but I've had a bit of a mammoth week (in a good way, though)! ****

****Regardless, new chapter is finally here and I hope that you'll love it.****

****P.s. Announcement of a competition at the bottom of the chapter :). ****

*** * ***

<p>Chapter Eight " Damage Control

Lewis's POV:

Popping up and running out of bed was a habit that I was becoming _way_ too accustomed with. Not in a good way.

After registering that my wife had bolted out of bed, I knew that it was going to be a long morning. That was even before hearing the confirmation of my assumption seconds later, which came from the noise in our ensuite that was connected to our bedroom.

The morning sickness was one of the only symptoms that Cleo had been suffering from lately as a result of her pregnancy, but that one symptom was bad enough for the poor thing. Even though the nausea was spasmodic and only hit a couple of days a week, there was no rhyme or reason as to when it would strike.

I'd researched and looked into everything I could for any natural remedies and relievers for the nausea, but we'd had _no_ luck at all. Every attempt could be categorized as being bad, or worse... either 'not making her feel better or any different' or, 'making her feel worse'.

Not to mention, I am certain that repeated morning sickness has got to be one of the hardest, if not the hardest symptoms of a pregnancy to hide. The prevalent vomiting just made the excuses for as to why Cleo was sick most mornings a chore to hide from her family, while we were still keeping the pregnancy between us and Bella, who Cleo informed me had managed to guess it.

So far, we had used every excuse from 'she swallowed a fly yesterday, what goes in, must come out' and 'Cleo thought her chicken was a bit nasty last night' to 'haven't you heard about the stomach flu that's going around?'.

However, despite all of our excuses and all of our attempts to execute those reasons the best way that we could, I knew that we couldn't run from the fact that we were running out of time, and wool, to cover my in-laws eyes with before our secret wouldn't be a

secret for much longer.

We were losing credibility. Fast.

After the cold tiles that woke my feet beneath me, I crouched behind Cleo. My next motion was to quickly scoop up her long locks away from her face and out of the firing line, rubbing up and down her back that I could feel tensing up beneath my hand.

"It's okay, bub, it's okay..." I whispered in an attempt to soothe her agony.

After ten minutes of on and off vomits, Cleo eventually cleaned her mouth, collapsing into my arms I opened up to invite her into.

"Sorry Lewis... I'm so sorry" she wept, shaking uncontrollably from her sickness beneath my arms.

I held her tighter, pressing a kiss to the top of her head as she buried into my chest and shoulder.

"What are you sorry for? It's not your fault..." I whisper in reassurance, smoothing and stroking the hair that I had been holding out of the way for her the last 10 minutes or so earlier.

"I know" she sniffled, before continuing. "But it's gross. And I woke you up. Again. I'm sorry..."

Beneath my arms where I was holding her against me, we were in a warm embrace from our positions sitting on the floor. I squeeze Cleo a little tighter, but just as gently, keeping in mind her physically and emotionally fragile state.

"Don't worry about it. How's the nausea?"

"Next question?" she retorted, even though I didn't need an answer to know what the answer to my own question was. I'd just been hoping that she felt better than how she looked.

I'd like to think that I, more than most people, can tell what Cleo's thinking and how she's feeling, but right now it didn't take a genius to understand what was represented by her scarily pale, washed out appearance compared to her usually darker and toned complexion. In fact, I could still feel her light, small shakes beneath my arms as another guide to answer the question that I had asked.

Eventually and slowly, I guide Cleo to stand up, walking her back to our room where we both collapse onto the unmade bed we had evacuated from earliee this morning.

Fluffing the pillow behind me, I lay on the bed, half-sitting up and half-reclined from my pillows as Cleo used my chest as her resting place and pillow, snuggling up against my side.

"Have you thought anymore about whether you think you should see a doctor? We don't even know how far along you are."

The topic of whether Cleo should or shouldn't see the local GP as any normal pregnant woman would do for the ultrasounds, specialist

appointments and check-ups had been discussed between us multiple times.

We'd narrowed down that bloods weren't an option, no way. I had the capabilities to monitor things like iron levels and blood pressure, without the added risk, and most other details that a blood test would determine were unchangeable and potentially only giving us more to worry about.

There was also the dilemma of ultrasounds which was another risk, although there was also the chance that the scan could be perfectly fine, safe and hassle-free.

Years ago, during her pregnancy with Allie, I had conducted a test on Bella with various ultrasound gels used in hospitals and clinics to ensure that the water concentration wasn't too high and wouldn't cause a transformation. Also, after I researched both the science and mythology behind mermaid offspring, I came to the conclusion that if a baby is mer at all, it would only be a change that would take place after birth, not during the gestational period.

My research had meant that she'd safely been able to have one ultrasound appointment, partly to put her mind at ease and ensure that fetus Allie didn't have any deformities. After only discovering that she was pregnant several months in, and after several months of lifestyle choices that weren't ideal for during a pregnancy, myself and our mutual friends realized that we had to put Bella's mind at rest. If we didn't, she was at risk of her paranoia disintegrating her mind, before she had even had a chance to go through childbirth.

"Yeah I have... As long as you're okay with it, I've decided I don't want to. As long as I keep healthy, take vitamins and get you to take the basic tests to keep my levels up and normal, I think that's all that matters. Of course it'd be nice seeing the baby, but it's not worth the risk. Not to mention, if there is something wrong with the baby, then there's probably nothing we can do about it whether we know or not, so there's no point worrying."

"That's fine. I'll do my best to find out what I can, but I don't want to expose you to any risks if it's not necessary" I confirm, pressing a kiss to the top of her head which was nestled between my arm and chest.

With a quiet exhale in the form of a sigh, Cleo moved her body to curl up into ball, clutching her arms around her stomach, assumedly in pain.

It was horrible seeing Cleo in pain, I hated it. The morning sickness and nausea hurt me enough while it was hurting her, so I couldn't even imagine how she would be feeling.

As much as I could not wait to be a father and as much as I could not wait for our child to be born, the initial shine of excitement about the news had been taken away as reality had started to sink in.

The logistics of a baby were setting in more than the prospects of the baby were.

Financially, we would be indefinitely reliant on one wage and Cleo's

maternity leave payout. Since I had had to quit my job after my Guillain-Barré hit and then after failing to be reinstated to my previous position, I was still only slowly climbing my way through the science industry all over again.

Yes we would have some income and cash flow for us, but in that time we would have to complete a nursery, buy the furniture and other big or small knick knacks for the baby, as well as likely have to shift out and find our own place away from the Sertori's once again.

The fact was looming that very soon, I would have to be supporting three people on one-and-a-bit payrolls, either in a house with six people residing in it, or by somehow affording to rent our own place again.

The more that I found myself considering the statistical, financial, logistical and factual details of our expanding family, the more I could feel the lump in the back of my throat and the tighter my chest began to feel.

Wriggling away from Cleo and beginning to get off our bed, I decided to preoccupy myself with making breakfast.

"Do you feel up to eating anything? I can bring you a plain piece of toast and a cup of tea if you want..."

Cleo shook her head, not moving from her curled up position on our double bed.

"I'll be fine. Don't think I'm up to eating yet."

I lean down to press a kiss to my wife's hair a final time, before leaving our room and deciding I'd make something for her anyway, so it was there when she did feel like eating.

* * *

><p>I walk downstairs to the silent first storey of my in-laws home which had become mine over the last few years. That was not a hard adjustment to make since for many, many years before that I'd always considered the place my home away from home.<p>

Noticing the silence, I realized I had forgotten that it was a weekend, meaning that Don was out playing his golf, Sam was working and Kim would either be at a friend's house in the aftermath of a party or out with a study group (knowing my sister-in-law, it was far more likely to be the first option).

I began to make simple eggs for myself and toast for both of us, with a pot of tea. However, it was as I opened the fridge to start pulling ingredients out, just like with everything in life at the moment, when the baby became the first thing I considered in relation to any aspect of day-to-day life.

After browsing through the fridge, I notice the side holder for milk, the egg holders, the fun-size bag of chocolate, the Chicken Tonight with a recommended serving for four and the evenly quantified bags of carrots. Everything consisted of even numbers, spaces and quantities. It was perfect for sharing and distributing between twos or fours... Not threes.

I could hear the footsteps coming down the stairs and made the automatic conclusion of who it was, given there was only one possibility of who it could be.

Cleo entered the kitchen and I instantly noticed her cheeks seemed to have a little more colour in them than what they had minutes earlier and she seemed a little brighter. I figured that it was getting safe to assume the morning sickness was passing on for the day.

"I'm just getting a drink" my wife informed me and I simply gave her a smile back in acknowledgment.

Shutting the door of the fridge and attempting to close my thoughts on some of my silly and worrisome thoughts that searching the refrigerator had presented, I continued with preparing breakfast.

Getting the bread in the toaster and the eggs underway, all was going well until I noticed one of Sam's cookbooks opened on the kitchen, with about 6 recipes spread out between the open pages. The serving sizes of four of the recipes were to prepare a meal suitable for two people, while the other two recipes were recommended to serve four people.

It was only a little thing, but it turned out that something small as serving sizes was enough to push me over the edge. It was enough to surface all of my fears and downsides that I had been trying to gloss over involving this new change in our lives.

Just as Cleo placed the cup and straw she'd been drinking from down into the sink, appearing to be about to walk off and return upstairs and most likely to our bedroom, I stopped her and removed the filter between my thoughts and my words.

"Cleo? Everything is for even numbers! There'll be three of us! What are we going to do?!"

Across the room, Cleo squinted at me, as though I was speaking a foreign language and she was trying to catch onto the same train of thought that I was headed down.

"Good calculating mister. We're going from two to three. What do you mean? There's not much we can do."

"But everything is going to be out of proportion! Everything is for two or four people! Everything is designed for an even number of people! We're going to be an ****odd**** number!"

I take a deep breath, preparing to list off a few examples that I had encountered so far to add fuel to my flame that I had kept to myself, noting that Cleo seemed a little confused during my pause.

"I mean cans of soup are for two people, or a sachet is for four people! Almost every recipe under the sun is for four people so regardless of if we move out again or stay living here and doubling recipes there's always going to be too much or too little food! And buying tickets is going to be uneconomical! Single tickets for movies, theme parks, you name it, and they are the most expensive. Not to mention, we'll need a child ticket on top of that as well

because family tickets are for _four_ people!

Cleo looked over to me vaguely, but a little warily.

"Is this your way of telling me that you're hoping we have twins? Just so that we will have an even number of people?"

Listening to what she said, the way she had worded it, I realized just how stupid it sounded and what a cheapskate it made me seem like.

"Cleo? Help me. I'm losing the plot over _soup_..." I pleadingly say to my wife, managing to keep a straight face for a second or two before losing it, bursting into laughter and shaking my head as I grasp my neck from behind. I was fortunate that it hadn't taken me long to realize just how far and just how dramatic my thought processes had become.

Stopping herself before she walked out of the kitchen, Cleo turned around with an amused giggle.

"Come here you big boofhead" she opened her arms up and we walked towards each other, wrapping our arms around one another in an embrace, while we both fought our amusement and struggled to contain our laughter.

"I could tell that you've been stressing out about something lately over the last few days... But _that's_ what it was?!"

I nodded shamefully, trying to disguise my laughs by pressing my lips into the top of her hair as we held each other tightly, our bodies shaking lightly in the bursts of laughter and amusement.

"Oh Lewis... There are so many alternatives out there, you big stress head. You can divide recipes into enough ingredient for three people, or, you know that leftovers are always welcome! We'll get over tickets and what not - it's only a matter of a few dollars difference. And what was the last thing you were freaking out over? I'm supposed to be the one who has the freak outs in this relationship, not you!"

"I know, Cleo... It was stupid. I love you. I love you and I love that kid, or kids, regardless of whether there's one, or two, or six of them in there and regardless of whether it'll make our family an odd or even number."

Cleo's amused smile widened more. Momentarily, she stabilized the bottom of my chin between a few of her fingers, while she used the other hand to gently stroke a finger or two along one of cheeks as she guided her lips up to meet mine.

Life was good.

No amount of odd or even statistics or recipes that were intended to feed one mouth more than we needed could change that.

* * *

><p>What were the thoughts on this chapter? Don't forget to pop a review in. **88**** reviews for the new chapter!

**

Next chapter: We look into life as newly-weds for Rikki and Zane, while we meet an elusive **new character...**

* * *

><p>So, it's competition time! Who would like to make the Far From Perfection 2 cover?...

RULES:

** - Remember FFP is a multiple-character focused story so I don't want to see like 3 photos of Rikki/Zikki (or any other character/couple for that matter!).**

** - The cover doesn't necessarily have to cram every character on the cover, perhaps just using one photo representative of H2O/Far From Perfection.**

** - You can enter as many photos/potential covers as you would like!**

** - Be creative!**

** - Submit your images, preferably jpeg with the dimensions of 300(width)x 450(height) or larger... A.K.A - NOT square. **

** - Send your image submissions to the email address on my bio, under the 'other accounts' heading. In case you were wondering, that email account is like a week old and is not connected to this account so don't waste your time trying to guess passwords, haha! **

** - Any questions, just message me.**

** - The deadline is a week from the date of posting, but if need be, I can give you an extension. Just send me a message if you need it. **

... And the prizes?

FIRST PLACE PRIZE:

** - Winner will be credited for the cover art.**

** - Winner will receive the next chapter in advance to it being posted.**

** - Winner's cover art will be used for this story.**

ALL ENTRANTS:

** - Will have their entries credited and posted on the FFP Tumblr page.**

** - Will receive a part of the new chapter.**

****Hey all! Very exciting week. Bought my first car, got a new job, found out I passed all my classes for this semester with flying colours, been on holiday and had my last day at my first job all in the last 10 or so days since I updated!****

****Thank you to all the beautiful people who entered my competition. I couldn't believe how many entries I received when I was only expecting like 4 or 5 - thank you! I can honestly say that I loved every single one of your entries which made it an impossible task to choose one as a stand out from the others. I actually had to bring in reinforcements and get friends to help me choose a winner. Congratulations to MakoIslands on the winning entry! I hope you all love the new cover as much as I do! All entries can be seen on the FFP 2 Tumblr blog. ****

****_To other entrants_ Please note that I really tried my hardest with sending out the sneak peeks for this chapter, but I was juggling only getting 20 minutes of poor internet connection a day while trying to send them out to everyone so I easily may have overlooked sending it to you. If this is the case, let me know either via review/PM/email and I WILL make it up to you! Also, apologies if you made a cover or were planning to, but didn't get a chance to enter before the deadline. There will be more comps eventually... ;)**

****Also, just as a warning, but bam, we are in present tense! Sorry guys. Only had about a half an hour to edit this and present is always easier! ****

****Thank you to all of the lovely reviewers and their kind words on the last chapter. Now, onto the story!****

*** * ***

<p>Chapter Nine " Better the Devil You Know

Rikki's POV:

Life as a wife, as a married couple, as Mrs. Zane Bennett; life as whatever you wanted to call it, is incredible.

Of course, Zane and I might have to step outside our bedroom for more than just food if we expected our life to feel like anything else than a dream.

In the past, I had never considered marrying Zane. In fact, I had never considered marrying anyone, or even marriage in general since I had never really seen myself as one of those people who got stuck in a rut, made roots and committed for the rest of their life. I had never seen myself as a married woman and as wife, with the prospect of a lifetime of fetching slippers, succumbing to the toilet seat staying up for the sake of a saving a fight and investing in a slow cooker for roasts just like any good old bumpkin would.

However, just because I had never considered it in the past, it isn't necessarily something that's not for me, simply because I had never been open to the idea previously. Instead, my interest in marriage had been proven to myself when I was metres in the air atop the Tower Eye, being asked the biggest question of my life. That -as well as

the breakfast at Palm Beach where Zane had proposed we eloped while we were away in Sydney- gave me a pretty good idea that maybe marriage is for me just as much as it is for a girl like Cleo.

A set of lips and a hand running up my bare back pulled me from my thoughts.

"What are you thinking about? World peace? Making the world a better place by entering the next 40 hour famine? You've got your serious face on."

"You know me too well" I retort with sarcasm as I move from my new husband's side, taking our sheet with me as a body wrap until I find more suitable attire for going downstairs. Zane and I had already learnt our lesson after Allie's innocent eyes had nearly seen a whole lot more than she should at her age when Will had sent her up to ask for our permission to watch a movie that belonged to me.

"Hey, where are you going? Did I say you could leave me yet? It's not even midday yet, Rik..."

I shrug, with a smug smirk in my husband's direction before readying myself for going down to the communal areas of our share house. As I walked out and downstairs, I didn't give Zane another word and I didn't provide an answer or explanation to Zane before doing so.

* * *

><p>"Oh look at this rare sight, Will. The honeymooners have decided to grace us with their presence and join us down here on planet earth once again..." my younger sister muses aloud after catching me walking down the exit. She must have spotted me from her spot at the dining room table while scrawling on an assortment of papers, that were accompanied by a diminishing packet of Tim Tam's.

"Have I told you that I love your sarcasm before? No wonder I've chosen to stay upstairs so much lately."

"Yeah, no. I don't think that your disliking to Tam's sarcasm is the reason that you two have taken it upon yourselves to stay locked in up there" Will adds with a smirk in Tam's direction, where the comment is welcomed by my sister's amusement far more enthusiastically than with my own eye roll.

Joining me in the living area after trailing downstairs a few consistent steps behind me, Zane seemed oblivious to the others comments that had me wondering whether he had even heard Tam and Will's banter in the first place.

However, as Zane wrapped his arms around me, my mind and thoughts quickly fled from pondering our housemate's taunts.

As he lead us towards the French-door refrigerator, Zane didn't hesitate to open one door to block Will and Tam's view from us before leaning in for much more than just a brief kiss.

After our deep, spine-tingling kiss (literally, kissing that close to the inside of the fridge is chilly to say the least) finally broke, our inhibition-less romp around the kitchen continues with Zane's discovery of a very creative use for the common wooden spoon

that happened to be in his reach, near the saucepans.

"Oh gosh. Thank goodness Allie isn't here today to see this..." Will says, speaking up disapprovingly. Really, his opinion is only acting as a reminder to me that he and Tam were still around after Zane and I shamefully got a little lost in the moment.

"This is what happens to people when they get married? They get a pretty ring and a piece of paper and then they think that they're free to begin their lives of degrading dignity. It's probably all in preparation for 50 years time, when you've seen and know every putrid and minuscule detail there is to know about each other. Please know that you don't need to get a head start on that by dropping your guard on the quantity and quality of your PDA's. Some of us need to keep our lunch down!"

Will didn't hold back with letting us know that he is agreement with my sister on her long-winded and unimpressed spiel. Unfortunately our housemates protests were enough for me to realise that Zane and I were interrupted just enough to be able to deflate our 'moment' and spoil it.

"I know... But don't get me wrong. Fluff and romance is great...when you're involved in it. It's just not so great to watch as a spectator sport."

Tam burst out laughing and as Zane moved a little further away from me, it became clear that there are only two people amused by the discussion that I felt as though they should be having behind our backs.

"Well it's not my fault that neither of you are as romantically blessed as I am!" I retort seriously, a move that I discover to be out of place in Tam and Will's lighthearted banter.

"That's right. And you're obviously ****so**** proud of your relationship and marriage that you felt the need to shun your friends and family to elope, right?!"

The direction and the bitterness that Tam took our conversation to only confirmed my instinct that has been something floating around in the back of my mind since we returned home from Sydney. I have had my suspicions about it since the day we told our nearest and dearest that we had made the decision to upgrade from being engaged, to being married on our own while we were away.

"Are you still disappointed that we didn't have a proper wedding ceremony and that you couldn't be there when we got married, Tam? I apologised for that - I said I'm sorry and that we just thought eloping was what was best for us. It really wasn't because we didn't want you there."

As Tam stood up from her seat at the dining table abruptly, she scoops the papers she had been working on, along with the packet of Tim Tam's, into her arms with her, as she left the room with three words sounding forced and anything but genuine.

"It's fine. Really."

* * *

><p>Later in the day, I drew the short straw while deciding who drew the short straw and get rid of the full and tied up bag of rubbish. taking it out to the plastic bin where it it is waiting for collection day out by our driveway.<p>

Domestic duties are a normal thing. However, seeing a guy that I have never seen before in my life sitting on our curb is not.

"Can I help you?" I frown cautiously, wondering why the young man with copper-coloured hair is sitting on our property and on our yard. As I gave the guy a once over, I note that he seems to be a little older than myself, appearing to be waiting for someone or something.

"I would have asked you if you could, so it doesn't look like you can, does it?"

"Excuse me?! Calm your farm, mate!"

The words of the guy which I automatically translate into a rude manner set me back a little... That is before he shot a glance behind his shoulder toward me with a cheeky smirk on his face which surprisingly enough set me back even more than the comment that I had misconstrued as rude had.

"I'm kidding. Thanks for the offer, but I'm fine. Sorry for messing with you, I was getting a little bit bored and needed a little bit of amusement. Sorry that that meant snapping at you."

I had been baited and I took it, being snared hook, line and sinker.

I struggle a little with believing the fact that the random I found myself engaged in conversation with, without either of us knowing the other's name, had been so successful in reading me so clearly, like a book.

"So, bored-boy ... What's your name?"

"If I tell you, I'd have to kill you" the man replies sharply, not dropping his game. I could sense his attitude bringing out a fight and challenging spirit in me to keep up. However, at the same time, it irked me that so far the guy always seemed to be that one step ahead of me and my game. That is not to mention that it kept me even more annoyed that so far, he had been able to read me so clearly and precisely. He knew that I would rise to the bait he set up on the earlier occasion, while I still have no clue and don't know the first thing about whoever I have been talking to.

"What about you? Tell me about you and whoever you are. You seem like an interesting woman. It might keep me entertained for a few more minutes then."

Mystery guy set another challenge and while my first reaction is to instantaneously rise to the challenge and respond, I could feel another instinct that struck me as familiar. There is something about his manner, his smile that feels way too familiar, but I just can't put my finger on how it could be.

"Nah. You can find another curb to chill out on and creep out poor residents from. My _husband's_ inside waiting for me."

"Ooh. Can I guess this 'husband's' name? Let me guess... Is it _Mr. X_? And maybe his name is '_Incognito_'?"

I roll my eyes and cross my arms. I can easily tell that he doesn't believe me... The thing is, I have no idea of why I care so much that he doesn't believe me... Like I care _that_ much to fake a marriage and a ring just on the off chance that I may meet and be challenged by a guy like this.

Maybe I am being so defensive because I feel a little insecure. Just minutes ago, there had been a passing moment, a flicker, that caused me to marginally feel like and suspect that I was being hit on...

While every ounce of me is screaming out that it isn't normal to find a stranger sitting out on your front yard, there is this curiosity and air of mystery to the situation which is only intriguing me more. The fact that a stranger who is not giving much information out about himself and his intentions is even more puzzling, but the familiarity to him is what is keeping me there.

I just can't nut out how, or when, or why a situation that really does feel to be a first-time meeting, can be so vaguely familiar at the same time.

Does he remind me of someone? Maybe I had been at school with a sibling of his or maybe it had been one of those chance-non-meeting-meetings where you accidentally bump into someone, apologize, share eye contact briefly and move on, assuming that you will never see each other again for the rest of your life.

Being torn away from them with a bellow, my thoughts cease of what I can do or say next to in the very least enable me to know this man's name, or, better yet, why he is here and what, or who, he is after.

"Hey, Benjamin!" the nameless guy exclaims as he looks over my shoulder to my house-mate as he is walking outside from our share house and heading over to us. "You didn't write, you didn't call... I thought you were breaking up with me!"

The guy in front of me fails to contain a laugh at what I am only left to assume is at his own joke. Meanwhile, at the same time, Will is doing his best to try and put up an un-amused eye roll, but I can tell he is suppressing a smile or even a laugh.

"Whatever, Kyle... This is a surprise. What are you doing here, mate?"

From the scrunched up face and confused smile on Will's face, I couldn't quite tell if it is a good thing or a bad thing that this person, whoever he is, is here on my front yard...

* * *

><p>So a little bit of a filler chapter here, I'm sorry, but it is definitely foreshadowing and bridging the path for our new

character and new storylines!

****Any theories/predictions/guesses about Kyle? Would love to hear them!****

****At least the big 1-0-0 reviews for the next chapter! :)****

****Next chapter: We uncover more about the identity of Kyle and what is connection to Will is. Meanwhile, Bella and Will let their friends in on their secret. ****

10. Flesh & Blood

****_Woo_ guys - 100 review mark right there! Thanks a million to the bunch of you! I was soooo scared that the sequel to my beloved Far From Perfection would not shape up, but glad that you appear to be loving reading it as much as I am loving writing it! Sorry that it's up a few days after reaching the big 1-0-0... I've just started my new job and had to say a very sad goodbye to one of my best friends, trying to spend as much time together as possible! Nonetheless, it got here eventually! ****

****So, we learn more about Kyle with our new chapter. As a visual aid, I wanted to try and choose a person/celeb that you'd be able to find pictures on to envision. The problem is that Kyle is a culmination of like three of my guy friends physically, personality-wise and in regard to his dialogue. Anyway, as a cliché, I just thought what the heck, let's go with the name thing. So, _Nic Westaway_ is who you can imagine as Kyle. However, if you too are a Home and Away fan, my Kyle really, really couldn't be further from Kyle Braxton (i.e. He would be more of a Chris than a Kyle)****.****

****Enjoy! :) xo****

*** * ***

><p>Chapter Ten â€" Flesh and Blood

Will's POV:

"Kyle? What are you doing here?" I question, as I walk over to the man who is barely two years older than me.

I haven't seen Kyle Hartley in years and years.

I had first met Kyle, Bella's older brother, when I was 18 and not long after we met each other's families not long after Bella and I had gotten together for the first time.

Even from way back then, I can remember it being a real task to try and find a time to meet when Kyle would be home, between his interstate and more local trips here, there and everywhere. For as long as I have known the guy, he would barely stay at one place for more than three days at a time.

However, over the years his travel paths extended to overseas and I would only ever see him during times of the year that called for obligatory Hartley family dinners, or else when Bella and I would happen to be in the same country as Kyle during our own far less

frequent travels.

"I'm guessing that my dear sister forgot to tell you about me dropping by? I just got off the airport shuttle bus" he pauses to gesture towards the bus stop that is located on the other side of the park in our street which is in sight from where we stand. "She's picking me up from here at any minute when she drops Allie off for you."

I nod at Kyle's explanation, before he seems to get carried away on another train of thought... A train of thought that I don't especially find so preferential now, or ever.

"I can't believe how many years it's been since I've caught up with you! I didn't quite know whether I should give you a handshake or whether I should have knocked you out for knocking up my little sister!"

I make the decision not to comment on the statement. While I have a clear answer and preference on it, I feel as though the statement is very much a hypothetical. Instead, I note the confusion on my housemate's face beside me. I assume that the puzzlement is over the unexpected meeting with the person who I am familiar with, since Rikki did not appear to have the same recognition.

"I'm guessing that you haven't met Bella's brother before? Rikki, this is Kyle."

Kyle joins in to my introduction of the two, adding a remark that makes me realize that despite the fact that I have not seen Kyle Hartley in almost five years, he is still very much the same guy. The fact that I haven't seen him since before Bella and I had broken up years ago did not change anything.

"We obviously haven't met before, Will. She wouldn't forget me if she had met me."

Kyle's cocky, smirk-riddled remark only holds my attention momentarily before I hear a car coming down the road. Given the off-peak time of day and the two visitors I am expecting shortly and any minute now, the car catches my attention.

With a glance behind me, I recognize Bella's little silver car coming up our road, a sight I have seen a hundred times before. However, today, it didn't take a genius to notice that Bella managed to get both herself and Allie out of the car about three times quicker than normal as I watch my girlfriend and daughter hurry over to the guy standing between Rikki and myself.

"Uncle Kyle!" Allie exclaims as she hurries over and gives her uncle's legs a cuddle, the only thing she is able to reach from her height. It doesn't take long at all for her to lose interest, moving towards me as she threw her arms up in the air as a signal for me to pick her up.

Meanwhile, a step or two behind Allie, Bella latches onto her brother the second that our daughter moves away from him, the two siblings hold onto each other in a tight squeeze for far longer than what Allie had.

I know that Bella has always had a close relationship with her brother since they were young, being forced to be each other's best friends when their lives were constantly being uprooted and shifted to every corner of the world. It is a connection that I had always thought I had been able to relate to, until my own sister that I had used to be so close to started to drift apart from me as I reached adulthood.

"Sorry Will, I think that I completely forgot to mention that Kyle would be hanging here until I dropped Allie off. It was quite a last minute arrangement."

"_Will?! Sorry Will?! I was the one stuck with being hassled by him" Rikki pipes up before I even have a chance to reply or get a word in edge-ways. Honestly though, I really can not tell if she is mucking around with Bella (as Rikki does) or if she genuinely has it out for and dislikes Bella's brother.

Regardless, Bella laughs at the comment as though she doesn't even consider it being anything other than sarcastic, before I alter the discussion and move on.

"Don't worry about it, Bells. It's been good to see him again after so many years."

"Yeah, it's been yonks since I've caught up with Will-ski over here. It's been like what... four? Five years? Allie, how old are you, sweetheart?" Kyle says, adding to Bella and I's conversation, as well as incorporating my obviously innocent daughter to how her age will impact on Kyle's question.

"I'm four!" Allie quickly and enthusiastically responds like she has been waiting for the question as she accidentally holds up three fingers instead of four to indicate her age.

At the same time as Allie answers Kyle, Bella lays a slap to her brother's shoulder as he concludes his uncertainty after Allie's response of her age.

"So yeah, I haven't seen you in almost five years in that case then."

"Kyle! Subtle!" Bella hisses unhappily to her brother who shrugged off his far from discrete calculations of how long has passed since Kyle and I have caught up, along with how long since Bella and I broke up based off of Allie's conception.

"And with that, we will be going" Bella adds before she says her goodbyes to our daughter, who she is routinely leaving under my care for the next few days.

After handing me Allie's kindy backpack and a few other bits and pieces I will need which I either don't already have for her or that go where Allie goes and whichever parent she is with, Bella and Kyle begin to move towards the car. This doesn't last long before the female of the two stops in her tracks, turns around and comes back towards myself, Rikki and Allie.

"Screw this. Allie knows about us so I don't even know who the hell we are even unnecessarily tiptoeing around?!" Bella says to me in a

low whisper. We are out of hearing range of the others as she nears me with a spring in her step, before she bounces on her tip-toes to enable her to reach my lips suddenly.

It takes a moment to adjust what is happening when one second she is talking and the next second we are kissing, but needless to say, there are no complaints coming from me.

This is the very first, very public appearance we have made since rekindling our former relationship.

The only other acknowledgement we have made to other people since hooking up again is the discussion we had with our daughter, trying to explain it to Allie who didn't quite catch the concept. Her reaction had consisted almost entirely of neutral, confused and repeated '_why's_'.

In the background, I can hear Rikki's exclamations and surprise at the very sudden public display of affection, given that as far as she and our other friends knew, we haven't been dating each other once again.

"Oh don't tell me that you seriously didn't see that one coming?!" Kyle pipes up knowingly.

Bella ends the kiss, pausing a moment after we pull away to give me a sweet smile and a stroke to my cheek before answering back to her brother.

"Yeah Kyle, you '_saw that one coming_' because I told you... You know that we're back together!"

Kyle begins to debate his sister and babble on about not needing to be told to know and all that pointless bantering and debating that he is good at, but I tune out the second that Bella looks back to me.

"I'm thinking about taking Kyle further up the coast and away for a few days. You know, take him on a few sightseeing things and to a few touristy places since I have no idea how long he will or won't be sticking around for. I just thought that I'd warn you that if you can't get in contact with me, I might be out of range or something like that, depending where we end up."

"No worries" I reply, pressing a kiss to Bella's cheek before she continues towards again, and actually gets back into her car this time.

Next thing, Bella and Kyle are speeding off together while Allie, Rikki and myself are left to make our way back into our share house.

* * *

><p>"So how come Bella's brother is down?" Rikki asks as we all subconsciously walked back into the living area where Zane is crunching numbers into his laptop and Tam is sitting in front of the TV, hoeing into an assortment of perfectly cut carrot and celery sticks.<p>

"I have no idea. She mentioned it recently when I was over just after she and Allie had _Skype-d_ him that Kyle was possibly going to be in Australia for a while since his VISA and funds were getting low, but I didn't know where or when or how long that meant" I explain to Rikki as Allie flees from my arms to watch whatever Tam is watching with her, something which I probably should be monitoring as her parent.

Rikki nods at the explanation before her face scrunches up in confusion.

"His VISA? Where has he been?"

Acting as yet another daily reminder that kids are sponges, absorbing and hearing way more than what you realize they do, Allie bellows out from the lounge, obviously listening in to both the television program as well as our conversation.

"Uncle Kyle's been in Africa! He sent me a letter with a lion hat and I got it from my letterbox!"

"Yeah, I think he was doing a bit of South Africa, then a couple of other places like Kenya and Madagascar" I add to my daughter's exclamation and input into the conversation, in order to answer Rikki's question more fully.

Rikki acknowledges my clarification with a nod, before she moves across the room and slots herself on Zane's lap where he is seated at the dining table, working with just as much fixation on his computer and his work as he had been when we entered the room. I wonder if he even noticed that all of us had returned inside before Rikki made herself comfortable on him.

"Did you hear that you missed out on meeting Bella's brother? It sounds like he's staying with her for a while."

"Well if he's staying with her for a while, then chances are that I probably _will_ end up meeting him at some point or another" Zane replies, failing to look up or react to anything other than the question as he remains intent on typing away on the laptop and sounding anything _but_ interested in hearing about Kyle.

Rikki rolls her eyes, removing herself from her self-appointed seat on Zane's lap and gestures for me to follow her over to the lounges. I sit down next to Allie on the couch she is sharing with Tam as the two watch the TV program together, while across from our seat, Rikki is doing a surprisingly really good job at taking up the entire other couch with her petite body.

"Did I hear that Bella's brother is staying with her at the moment?" Tam questions seconds after her sister and I settle in our spots nearby her on the lounge.

"Yeah, but who knows how long that will be for. Could a week, it could be six months. No one probably knows."

As if it is as simple as flicking a switch, Tam's attention falls from being absorbed by the television, but aware of what we were talking about, to being completely absorbed by our discussion.

"Ooh. What's he like?!"

"He's great fun. Besides the fact that he might have changed in the half a decade since I've really caught up with him, he's a larrikin. I don't know if Bella's ever introduced her parents to you, but he and Bella are almost exactly like their dad, Paul."

"Sounding good... Is he single?"

One of Rikki's latest taunts and teases towards Tam is attempting to convince her that she is going to die alone as a single, crazy cat woman. That has also been prompting the eighteen year old's even more recent '_hubby hunt_' to get a head start on being able to counteract and avoid her recent fears that Rikki has instilled in her. It is all Rikki's fault that the poor kid doesn't realize she still has pretty much her whole life ahead of her yet.

"As far as I know he is, but he'd also be pretty close to 10 years older than you, Tam."

"No skin off my nose. I can deal with an age difference... But he's not gay, right?"

I laugh at the question that is made to sound almost normal while Tam is researching a potential entrant and delegate, undoubtedly for her 'hubby hunt'.

"Trust me. From what I know Kyle Hartley is certainly _not_ gay."

"Well, well, well... Ladies and gentlemen, I think we have a winner!"

* * *

><p>Later in the day, lying on our stomachs and sprawled out across the floor of my bedroom in the space between my double bed and Allie's butterfly-quilted trundle, my daughter and I rest on our elbows as we play with her dolls together.<p>

Currently, I am the puppeteer of the two male dolls she has (Allie has named them '_daddy_' and '_uncle Zane_'), while she juggles between her control of manipulating about 10 of her other girl dolls, that she too had so originally named. Just to name a few, there is '_Aunty Tam_', '_Aunty Cleo_', '_Aunty Rikki_', '_Mummy_', '_Kayla from Kindy_', '_Peppa Pig_' '_Nanna_' and '_Grandma_' in her collection.

... Bella and I really need to teach our kid a few lessons in originality.

At the present moment, Allie is playing with '_Nanna_' and '_Aunty Cleo_' while she itches and scratches a spot on one of her arms and another spot on her other shoulder. She has done it a few times already, but I didn't take any note of it, nor did I feel as though I had any reason to react to it until I realize just how many times she has done it solely in the space of time that we have been playing together.

"Allie? Can you let daddy see your arm, please?"

My little girl nods, compliantly holding her arm out towards me, revealing the red, slightly swollen and erratically patterned rash on her arm.

"Is that hurting you, sweetie?"

Again, she gives me another nod. "But it's okay daddy. Playing with my dollies stops my brain thinking it hurts."

I press a kiss to her little arm that is still in my hand from the examination I conducted a few moments ago as I make a mental note to ask Bella if she has noticed any rashes on Allie recently.

"Is your shoulder sore like your arm is, Allie?"

Allie nods and as if on cue, she starts to scratch the top of her shoulder once again.

Frowning, I sit up from my spot on the floor where I have been playing and acting out the dolls lives according to Allie's wishes and demands.

"Come here please, sweetheart" I say, gesturing for her to sit on my lap. I do this partly because I know that it will interrupt the doll roleplay and partly because then I am able to nurse my daughter and check for any other noticeable ailments to accompany the rash that I don't think has been there for long.

Cooperatively and without another word, Allie gets up and makes herself comfortable from her seat on my lap, nestling her head into my arm and chest tiredly. That is another cause for concern. Not only does my generally energetic child seem far sleepier than she should for this time of day, but I also know she is very much Bella's daughter. Just as with her mother, I am not used to Allie being quiet for very long or not babbling on about whatever she was doing at whatever time of day it is. Generally too, playing dolls is her time to shine and let her imaginative and conversational skills take over.

Rocking Allie in my arms, I start to feel her forehead which is way hotter than I can ever recall Allie's, or anyone's skin feeling. She feels far hotter than what seems to be normal for anyone

"Bubba, do you feel really hot?"

Another wordless nod, so I start to feel a few other parts of her body to see how her body temperature compares on places like her foot, her arm and the top of her chest just below her neck as I try to identify whether she is running a fever or if she has a temperature. However, the odd part is that the rest of her feels completely icy and cold in comparison to her head.

It is worrying to say the least.

Not knowing quite what to do for your child is a frightening sensation that I haven't felt before... In our circumstances, the situation is especially complex when your daughter is a mermaid and being sick isn't quite as simple as making an appointment with the doctor or local GP. Instead, I pull my phone out and call the first

person who comes to mind and who needs to know, also being the first person who may be able to help me out with what to do or what not do.

"Bella? I really hope that you and Kyle haven't left the coast yet..."

* * *

><p>So what is everyone's take on Kyle Hartley? Love him? Hate him? Looking forward to more about him or wish he never came? Glad Bella and Will are going public now? Also, what is up with poor little Allie?

112 reviews to the next chapter guys!

**Next chapter: Cleo and Lewis muster up the courage to share their news with their friends and family. **

11. New Beginnings

(**Apologies for re-posting the chapter and I am completely sorry to anyone who thought this is a new chapter... I just had to update a few things that I forgot to change before I posted it and didn't realise until now. If you read the first version, you don't have to re-read, I've essentially just changed a few minor grammar things and changed the number of reviews needed because I miscalculated! Very sorry!)**

Thank you for all of your feedback and reviews on the last chapter. It was more than I was expecting to get so double thanks! I really loved everyone's feedback on Kyle... The consensus is that most people expect to see Bella having a brother, but have welcomed him warmly! I'm loving writing that guy so far so it's always nice to get positive feedback that readers are enjoying him too!

**Anyway, it's finally here and I hope that you will enjoy it! **

* * *

><p>Chapter **Eleven**** â€" ****New Beginnings**

_Cleo's__ POV:_

"Hey, how far do you think I am?" I ask my husband from my spot standing in front of the full length mirror in our bedroom, questioning him with a stare on my frame and body shape.

With a fixation on my stomach and abdomen in particular, I fluff with my casual knee-length dress, alternating between allowing it to float freely and then constricting the material to my stomach and pressing the clothing to my belly. I try to compare and contrast the comparison in my size, but thankfully, at this stage there isn't much baby there to be able to visibly note my pregnant state.

"I think I have as much of an idea as you do, Cleo."

We are both oblivious. As unlikely as either option is, I may be a

matter of weeks into my pregnancy, or I could be eight and a bit months if my body is extremely skilled at concealing a child. While both alternatives are unlikely, neither is impossible.

The fact that Lewis and I have no idea of the trimester, the health and condition of the baby, or how long I have left in the pregnancy, and not to mention our lack of planning the pregnancy meant that we have no idea of a due date or when it could have been the beginning of nine months. It is all one big guessing game.

However, that is the sacrifice Lewis and I have made in unison with our decision to avoid doctors and tests unless there is a critical need for it in the case that we become concerned that my own or the baby's life is at risk.

When you are a mermaid, doctor's appointments to know how many weeks into a pregnancy you are or how healthy your baby is just an extreme luxury that come at the risk of ending up in a laboratory or in a theme park before even reaching the end of your gestational period.

"When are we going to tell your family, Lewis?"

Yesterday we had made the mutual decision to tell my father, step mother and sister today after we acknowledged the fact that there are only so many excuses we could come up with to explain my morning sickness that has been lingering throughout entire days. The fact that we all know it isn't contagious given that I am the only one in the household with the inability to keep food down and stay awake much later than 8:30 at night also makes it harder excuse, too.

"In 3 or 4 months time?" Lewis squints with a cheeky grin in response to my question. He knows that I am not going to let that answer pass and it looks like he is almost preparing himself to be the recipient on the receiving end of a playful slap or smack from the response he knew I would not approve of.

Ever since we got married, I have always had to 'encourage' (more like 'nag') Lewis to keep in touch with his family members which isn't his favourite past time. It isn't like his family members are difficult people or that they have a strained relationship with Lewis or myself, but since we got married he has rarely felt motivated enough to check-in with his family of his own accord.

"That is not acceptable buddy. Besides, who knows, if this baby has gone undetected for that long already, we may potentially have a newborn in 3 or 4 months time. Would you rather try to explain a newborn baby than an unborn baby?"

Lewis nods with a far less-enthused expression.

"Valid point. I'll make arrangements for us to meet up with them... soon" Lewis responds as he walks over to me from where I am still in front of the mirror before he presses a lingering kiss to my cheek. "But, before that we've got one other family to deal with telling first..."

* * *

><p>The low decibel tick, tock, tick, tock is the only audible noise

gracing the dead silent lounge room of my family's home.<p>

Lewis and I are sitting together, holding hands subtly on the double seat lounge across from the second and larger lounge where my dad is sitting alone, in the closet position to my younger sister Kim who has taken the single seater lounge for herself.

Currently, the four of us are all waiting for my step-mother Sam to arrive home to begin our family meeting that Lewis and I had organised together, which she is 15 minutes late for. Over that time, we have all spent the last 10 minutes sitting in relative silence, apart from the odd offer to make a hot drink or question of whether anyone is hungry.

"Sorry I'm late" Sam apologizes immediately after seeing her family sitting in silence, clearly waiting for her as soon as she bursts through the front door of the house the five of us all call home. "I got held up at work and didn't realise what the time was and how late and I was already."

"It's fine" my dad smiles at his wife who takes the seat next to him. "Cleo and Lewis were waiting for you to arrive to tell us something."

Kim pipes up for the first time since Sam returned home.

"I bet you right now that they're having a baby..." my younger sister does not look either overly amused by the news that she has unintentionally nailed.

"Don't be ridiculous, Kimmy. They're not silly. They know they are too young to have a child. They're a responsible couple and were wise enough to have lived with us for the last few years while saving a comfortable amount of money for them to support themselves enough to move out. It's far more foreseeable for them to move out than have a baby, right?!"

I have been slowly sinking deeper and deeper into my seat during my father's spiel that is making the news we are preparing to share a hundred times harder to deliver to my family.

After hearing what my father had to say on the topic, I manage to convince myself of wimping out and waiting a bit longer to tell my family that there is in fact going to be a new addition to the family... Until I discover that Lewis is nowhere close to being on the same page as I am.

At the end of his reply to shooting down Kim's correct theory that she will soon be becoming an Aunty, my dad looks to Lewis and I for reinforcement and confirmation that the prospect of us having a baby is the furthest thing from the truth. While I haven't moved a muscle, Lewis is unknowingly to me, shaking his head at my dad and his apparent hope that grandchildren would be a long, long way ahead in the future.

"What do you mean by that?!" Dad questioned with an expression that is clearly far from happy.

While the question is offered to my husband, in response to his head shake moments earlier, but it is me who answers.

"A house and moving_ isn't_ our news, dad... A baby _is_, though - I'm pregnant."

The reactions that follow my difficult announcement are overwhelming in all different aspects of the word.

My dad, Sam and Kim all instantly rise from their seats, but while my sister and step-mother rush over to Lewis and I to congratulate us and pump us for details, my dad differs as instead of walking over to us, he walks straight out of the room.

After the hugs and congratulations excitements are over, the next questions that Sam and Kim both want to know is how far along I am in the pregnancy and what day the baby is due. Questions that we have neither answer to.

Since we have not changed our mind on avoiding doctors for all of or as much of the pregnancy as we can, Lewis and I have no way of knowing those details. While it means that we don't know a date to look forward to or countdown to, it means that my mermaid secret is safe from being exposed through a set of unintentionally revealing blood tests with the potential to pick up on marine biological traits. Either that, or an ultrasound consisting of a too high of percentage of water can just as easily reveal my secret and just as quickly.

"I don't know. We haven't had a chance to go to a doctor's appointment yet" I explain concisely with the excuse that covers over the real reason why he haven't been or even made any appointments yet is believable and feasible right now, but I know that we are going to have to come up with a much better reason to believably be able to dodge doctor's appointments and due dates _very_ soon.

After giving the two other females in our family my excuse, I quickly pass the ball, so as to speak, on to Lewis to deal with, enabling me to be able to follow dad to where I seem to be the only one to have noted him fleeing outside moments earlier.

"Dad?" I say at a volume not much louder than a whisper after stepping outside to our backyard that overlooks one of the Gold Coast's many intricate canals. I immediately see him from where he is sitting in one of the eight seats that makes up our outdoor dining setting.

Slowly, I approach him and take a seat opposite him.

"Sorry, Cleo. I just got a bit overwhelmed in there and I needed to step outside and get a bit of air. I was completely unprepared for hearing that."

"I could tell that after what you told Kim. Sorry... If it wasn't for Lewis shaking his head at your question, I would have waited another day and waited for better timing to tell you guys about the baby."

Before that second, I fail to even notice where my hands have ended up since I sat down next to dad, until he comfortingly places a single hand on top of one of mine that is resting on the table in front of us.

"Don't blame Lewis. Honestly, I don't think it would have mattered how much of a good mood I am in or how good the timing is. Not much could have prepared me for hearing that one of my little girl's is pregnant right now, sweetheart. I didn't have the faintest idea that you and Lewis were even considering a family yet."

"Neither did we, if that makes you feel any better. But it still happened and now we're really excited for this baby."

Dad lets out an exhale that I can tell is louder than usual. Initially it makes me cringe - he really, really is not happy about this baby, but as he proceeds to speak, I feel significantly more at ease.

"I'm sorry Cleo. I'm not disappointed in you and I know that I'll look forward to being a grandfather, but I'm just having difficulty wrapping my head around the fact that my baby is going to be having a baby."

With that, my dad places an arm on my back and I allow my head to fall to his shoulder as I snuggle, just a little, within our embrace.

Even though Lewis and I's announcement did not go all that well, it went better than I had expected it to and I know that any of the difficulties or bad feelings induced by my pregnancy is nothing that a little time would not be able to mend.

* * *

><p>After informing my family of the pregnancy and the baby that would come as a result of it earlier that morning, Lewis and I felt a sudden inspiration to meet up with our friends later in the day and share our news with them too.<p>

After making arrangements to meet up at Mako Island, Lewis and I met the rest of our group, consisted of Rikki, Zane, Bella, Will and consequently Allie, out on the Island and in the moon pool.

We are all gathered together and the only thing that our friends know (other than Bella, who had guessed it in Sydney before even Lewis knew) is that Lewis and I have something to tell them.

"Spit it out" Rikki states firmly, growing impatient and asking us for the fourth time within the 5 minutes since we have arrived.

Rikki is cosying up with Zane after convincing (also known as conning) him into getting in the water with her since us girls had made our way to the island the aquatic way, while the boys had met up to take a boat out together. I am in the water and Lewis is sitting on the ground, leaning up against the rock wall of the cave near my spot in the moon pool.

Also in the water is Bella, closest, resting her arms on the ground, as well as Allie who is occupying herself by alternating between swimming around the moon pool with her gorgeous little pearly white tail or, diving to the bottom of the and watery floor before returning to the surface. Will is also on the ground with Lewis,

sitting on the edge of the stony floor with his feet dipped in the water near Bella.

Although it is the first time I have seen Bella and Will together officially as a couple again for the first time in almost five years, there really isn't much change in their behaviour than what there has been in recent times. Just add a few more kisses to their original blurred lines closeness and you have what they are like together compared to just as friends.

"Do you want to tell them, or do you want me to?" Lewis asked in a low whisper, distracting me from my thoughts and pulling me back to the present.

"I think it's your turn. I said it earlier."

Lewis nods and presses a brief kiss to my cheek before clapping his hands together once, leaving them there as he catches our friends attention.

"So, we pulled you guys all out here because we wanted to let you all know at once that Cleo and I are going to be parents."

While genuine shock and joy is expressed on our friend's faces instantaneously, I'm sure that I am the only one who notices the delayed reaction and the second or two pause before Bella reacts with the same happiness... I'll have to remind myself to thank her later for pretending that she didn't know before everyone else and before Lewis as she proceeds to congratulate us both and ask all the same questions she already knows the answers to as she acts in the same way with the same excited manner of surprise as our other friends had just done so.

"How exciting! But would you just look at us all now! We're married, you have a kid and you're married and soon going to have a kid... When did we all agree to grow up and have lives past worrying about full moons and exams?"

Through the chorus of excitement at our news that follows, there was one line that really stuck with me... Echoing through and through my head.

"Recently, it's like a whole new beginning and a whole world apart from our lives of even just a few years ago... When and where and how did that happen?!"

All of a sudden, I don't know how I feel about this whole growing up business...

* * *

><p>Hope you loved the chapter. Most people seem to love a bit of Clewis :) I thought that I would find it really easy to write this storyline as several of my friends have had are having babies in the last few months, but it was surprisingly hard so I hope I pulled it off! **

**Any feedback, wishes, musings, comments, whatever, just pop in the cute little review box and let me know! Thanks you gorgeous readers!
**

****Chapter 12 when we get to 128 reviews. ****

****Next chapter: Rikki voices her concerns over Tam to Zane, with little result. Then, later on, the share house gets a very unexpected (and unwelcome) visitor. Guesses, anybody?****

12. Fool For Love

****Hey guys, another chapter at last! I hope you will enjoy it.****

****Big thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter and supported my work. Thank you. ****

****Now, onto the new chapter... Enjoy!****

*** * ***

<p>Chapter **Twelve** â€"**** Fool For Love****

_Zane's__ POV:_

Earlier today, tonight was declared as a group night, where all members of our share household are expected to bond and hang out together. Regardless of whether everyone wants to be a part of the night or not, they are forced to be a part of it and be there. Either that, or they have to produce the best excuse in the world to explain why they can't be a part of it.

The monthly evening on the last Saturday of every month has been a tradition since it was just myself and Will, two bachelors living it up together four and a half years ago.

After Rikki, and then Tam had moved in, as well as Allie when it is Will's turn to look after her, the girls have all since been inducted into our communal tradition too.

In the very centre of our living room, in front of the television, Allie and Rikki are just finishing singing the 'Circle of Life' together (or 'the shiracle of liiiiife', if you ask Allie).

On SingStar nights, we will always begin with the kid-friendly Disney or The Wiggles versions of the game for Allie to give a few songs that she is familiar with a shot (even though she probably knows less than 10% of the words, instead making up a whole other, ultra-entertaining vocabulary) before she crashes from tiredness either in Will's arms or on the lounge.

"Do you know that you're such a good singer, A? Just like your mummy. hey?" Rikki says to pump up the ego of the completely adored and spoiled four year old in our presence. However, although I am sure that I am not the only one who is tempted and inclined to, no one tells Rikki that the same can really not be said for her and her voice.

The four year old smiles, before displaying the tell-tale sign that signals that she will be asleep in ten minutes or less as she starts

to rub her eyes.

Especially given that Will mentioned that she has been under the weather earlier today, I could tell he is keeping a close eye on her and monitoring Allie to ensure she doesn't get worse under his care. After he called his child's mother, he explained to us earlier that he and Bella decided that she should stay with Will at our house, but that they would both take her in to the doctor if Will made the call and could see that her condition was worsening.

Just as I predict from past experience, it doesn't take long for Allie to doze off. The second that the toddler falls asleep, the fun begins when the rest of the gang and I are able to discard the two Allie-targeted versions of SingStar, in exchange for Band Hero as well as the games and songs that the rest of the older members of the household love.

After shifting to her father's and my best mate's arms, Allie appears to be well on her way to falling asleep. However, just to ensure that the tot doesn't get worked up and annoyed after hearing the songs being sung changing to one's that she is unfamiliar with, Rikki decides to continue with the Disney songs just until she is definitely asleep. I think this decision is more of a popular decision than the rest of us like to let on to.

Sticking with the Disney songs I don't mind so much, but when my wife pulls me up from off the lounge with a swift tug after grasping my hands, I am definitely far less enthusiastic about her suggestion and desire to sing Disney with me.

I immediately fight against Rikki's request as she tries to keep me standing and by her side, shoving a microphone into my hand while I seize the moment to sit back down again.

"Please Zane?! Just one song? I'll promote you to hubby of the year and thank you... later."

"Rikki... You know I'm not fanatical about singing. I don't even know that much Disney. I can barely tell Pocahontas's from Pumbaa's. I led a sheltered childhood!"

She hovers over some Lady and the Tramp song I have never heard before in my life and quickly starts the song, pausing the round after discovering I had missed the entire first line of the song out of bewilderment without even trying.

"Come on... Lady and the Tramp was always my favourite! Either sing ONE song with me or I'll force you to be all cute with me and re-enact the meatball-noodle scene, and trust me I have my ways and means" Rikki smirks, handing me an ultimatum knowing full well that I like pasta, and especially meatballs, significantly less than I like singing Disney songs.

"Fine" I groan, knowing that if I try to, it's more than likely that I would have won that conversation. However, I also know that it is far easier, faster and less painstakingly frustrating, with the added advantage of knowing that I would have a happy wife by just singing for two and a half minutes and getting it over with, as I proceed to swallow my pride and do so...

* * *

><p>By a little later in the night, we had traded karaoke for movies. Now, the feature film is probably halfway through, yet everyone seems anything but interested in watching the movie that Rikki and Tam had had their choice over, after threatening to boycott earlier in the evening if we denied their requests.<p>

Instead of watching the flick, Rikki and myself have been alternating between kissing, cuddling and annoying or irritating each from our tangled embrace on the double seated is on the single seater recliner and by the goofy looks and smiles on his face, it is reasonably safe to assume that he has been on his phone, texting Bella for the last 45 minutes or however long it has been since he had freed his arms from his sleeping daughter, having taken her up to his room he shared with her. Meanwhile, Tam is sprawled out on the other lounge like the one Rikki and I shared, but instead, I think she had been dozing in and out of consciousness through the entire movie.

"I'm hungry... Anyone else up for some late-night snacks?"

There is two affirmative responses to Will's question coming from the sisters, not surprisingly. Following through with his question, Will got up and headed for the kitchen where I hear the distinct sounds of plastic packaging being rustled with and sorted through.

"Hey, has anyone seen a share packet of those little _Caramello Koala's_? I only bought them like a week ago as a treat for Allie. I was gonna share them out."

There is a silence in the room, as Rikki, Tam and myself look between each other with accusing stares after listening to what Will had yelled out from the next room over. Food is a highly serious matter in our household. However, unfortunately the disappearance of food is not at all an unusual occurrence in our home. In fact, more likely than not, it will always cause a string of arguments and claims, bringing up past issues which far surpass the issue of vanishing food.

However, today is different. As a confession slips out from Tam's lips, I am left shocked. Normally it takes a lot more work to pry a confession from her lips, let alone a self-induced one.

"Oh sorry Willâ€¦ That would be me. I was pretty grumpy after having the late notice shift on the weekend and I thought that I had bought them a few weeks ago, sorry."

With a glance over to Rikki, I can tell that she is just as surprised, if not a little annoyed at the missed opportunity. Who does she have left to tease and torment now?

"Get real Tam... A few weeks ago? As if they would have lasted that long between us in _our_ household!" Rikki laughs, lucky enough to catch her chance to tease her little sister after all.

Moving more than she has since she first sat on the lounge, Tam wriggles around to pull herself off the lounge. She shoots a glare at Rikki (and consequently me too), spitting seven words of annoyance out: "I said _sorry_. It was a mistake."

She inhales and takes a big, deep breath before slowly, but sharply enunciating the following four words, "Get. Over. It. Rikki", partnering her sassy words with her storming out of the room to make for a grand exit.

* * *

><p>"Do you think Tam's been acting weird? Or is it just me?" Rikki muses, rolling onto her side and leaning her arms and chin on my chest in the dark of our bedroom. Just a few minutes ago, we had made the mutual decision that we should try and get to sleep.<p>

"Is it just you acting weird? Yeah I'll second that" I smirk after blocking my chest with my hands, knowing that I would receive the playful slap that I proceed to feel just seconds later.

I take a moment to consider Rikki's question past the point of my initial reaction to search for a sarcastic comeback and to take the question a little more seriously.

"I wouldn't say that I think Tam's acting out, as such, but I just think she's more reserved than she normally is. I can't say I blame her. She's just started a new job as well as studying again and then her big sister went away on holiday without her and came back a married woman. I wouldn't be stressing if she's acting a little abnormally until all this settles down."

"I guess so..."

Rikki sighs as I feel her weight and pressure on my chest and abdomen, before hearing her collapse back down onto her pillows, continuing to speak and consequently over-analysing the situation.

"I don't know. I just have this feeling that there's more to the story than that... Maybe it's us. Perhaps all our PDA's since we got back are upsetting her or something like that. Maybe it makes her feel lonelier or something. We're together, Will's got Bella and Allie, but then there's poor, single Tam..."

I don't like where I feel as though this discussion is going. In my opinion, I am far too young and it is far too early in our marriage for Rikki and I to discard kissing in public, any form of flirtation in public and anything more than that just yet. We are still a long, long way off being like an old married couple, celebrating our golden anniversary after 50 years of marriage yet.

"I'm not sure where you're leading this, but I'm telling you right now that I am not taking a vow of purity from any form of public display of affection, kissing or anything with you for your sisters sake. No way, no."

"Good! I wouldn't ask, approve of or want you to anyway."

I smile, trying to slowly navigate my mouths way to her lips in the dark of night, feeling pretty confident that I have nearly reached my destination after feeling warm breath on and around my nose.

However, before I have a chance to do anything about locating her

lips, Rikki continues to elaborates on her last thought and begins to speak once again.

"... Well not for another six months or so anyway."

* * *

><p>The following morning at breakfast time, Will and Allie are sitting in front of the TV watching Play School together, Tam is acting like nothing had happened last night and Rikki and I are canoodling over muesli... All the while, none of us had any realisation over the fact that today just so happened to be 'receive an unexpected visit from the landlord' day is just about to commence...<p>

Although the front door of our share house opens to an unwelcome visitor, but none of us react as though the possibility that we are the current subjects of a home invasion is impossible, which it isn't. Surprisingly, none of us flinch over the fact that someone has just walked into our home, uninvited, but when the voice of that person booms over all of our noise, I'm sure that I am not the only one who wants to run and hide.

"What the hell? Who are all these people, son?!"

My father, and the owner of our share house is standing there under the doorway and arch that leads into the living area, as his head darts between Will, to Tam and to Allie.

"Well you know Rikki..." I explain quickly to extinguish my father's evident disapproval, but knowing that now is not the time to mention that she isn't just my girlfriend who he had never respected, but that she is now my wife. Changing my hand's direction to the others in the room, I move on from Rikki quickly, flinging my pointed hand around.

"That's Tam over there. She's Rikki's younger sister. And you know of Will, he's been my housemate since the start and that's his daughter with him."

I can tell that all my dad can see is a disapproving shade of red as he stands there, fuming at myself and my housemates who I hadn't necessarily warned him of.

I can see the fuming anger positively pouring out of his ears to the point that as he turns around and storms out from the house with a slam of the front door, that it is so loud that it freaks out Allie.

Even though my dad has left for now, I know I can bet on the fact that he will be coming back... Something I am looking forward to even less than him coming and showing up unexpectedly in the first place...

* * *

><p>So what did we all think of that chapter? I hope that you loved it! Give me any feedback as usual and I will be eternally grateful. Who is on Zane's side and who's teaming with Rikki on the Tam thing? Is something deeper going on with Tam like Rikki's

instincts are warning her, or is Zane right that is just all the recent changes that have her unsettled? And Harrison's arrival can only mean bad news, right?

****I can't wait for the next Zane chapter... Lets just say things will be heading downhill, fast, in more ways than one...****

****Next chapter: ****

**** - Bella catches Will's lip-lock attempt with someone else. ****

**** - Allie's mysterious illness worsens. ****

**** - Yet another old face returns. Who do you think has come back this time? ****

****When I get 140 reviews I'll update with chapter 13...****

13. Where There's Smoke

****Thank you for all of the wonderful feedback on the last chapter everyone. It truly does mean a lot to not only know that people read my story, but also that they enjoy it and what they think.****

****On a side note, 151 reviews! Wow! Only like 10 more than what I was expecting... Thank you!****

****Enjoy my new chapter and be sure to let me know your thoughts!****

*** * ***

><p>Chapter ****Thirteen****** " ****Where There's Smoke...**

Bella's POV:

"What about that time when we were in China, you would have been about 10 or 11, so I must have been around 13. You and I had that argument over something stupid, like where we were going to eat lunch. Then somehow I hurt your feelings and you ran off... Mum, dad and I spent all night looking for you. I probably felt the most guilt that I've ever experienced when we thought we lost you, but then we found you in that little village the next day... They had basically adopted and employed you because you were so convinced that you would never come back!"

My brother and I have been having a night in, sharing a bottle of wine and a pizza, catching up with each other's lives, getting up to speed with the present, while reminiscing about the past.

"Nope... I have absolutely no recollection of that. It doesn't sound like me at all! I don't know what you're talking about at" I lie with a laugh, knowing the exact moment my big brother is talking about, remembering that time half-reminiscently and half absorbed with the fact that I hope my daughter will take after her father and bypass the years I can remember of being a moody and snotty pre-teen, like the time Kyle is in the process of reminding me of.

Growing up all around the world, my brother and I have always been

there for each other. While our parents were more often than not, out working to provide for our family and fund our frequent moves to every corner of the world, Kyle and I had been the only constants in each other's lives, holed up in unfamiliar countries where we knew no one, nothing and not even the language most of the time.

This had been great for the most part, having a brother that doubled as a best friend when you can spend time exploring new parts of the world together and when you know you have each other's back. The drawback of your brother being one of your only friends is that the days when I would be angry at him for breaking my jewellery or when he'd be fuming at me for overwriting or deleting high scores on his game would become very long and very boring days. It's exhausting hating your best friend.

The two of us had been through most of our lives together, until Kyle's 18th birthday had arrived, along with his burning desire for freedom.

That desire is clearly still burning a decade on with his ongoing travels. Sure he has settled for brief periods and time and spent a year or so living in Vietnam, two years in London, 18 months in Nicaragua, 6 months in the States and another 8 months in Africa most recently, but aside from that, the guy hasn't stopped travelling and flitting between countries for the last ten years.

Although he had 'left me' to travel the world, I have been fortunate enough that his emails, phone calls, stopovers in Australia and visits we both make to our parents mean that I am still able to see him reasonably frequently, a couple of times a year.

Even living oceans apart we are always still there for each other in a flash.

As an example, a few weeks into Allie's life I had experienced a bit of a lack-of-sleep-induced meltdown which coincided with my lease not being renewed on my apartment, so Kyle had even paid for my return ticket to spend a month living with him in New Zealand to enable me to have a place to stay and an extra pair of hands to help me with Allie while I searched for a new residence via internet correspondence.

"So what time is Allie getting dropped off? I'm missing that kid! You know, it's very inconsiderate of Will to want to spend time with his daughter."

"I'm not too sure, sorry. On a Sunday night, he generally drops her off a bit later, generally once she's asleep, but it does vary a bit" I explain, taking another sip of wine.

Kyle nods as he takes another slice of the pizza that he has been single-handedly demolishing.

"Righto... How are things with him going? You two would have been together again for what, a month or so now, hey?"

Out of reflex, I cringe at the question my brother has posed and we instantaneously both set each other off with laughter before I even have a chance to give him an answer.

"Honestly, it's a bit weird at the moment. It's like it's old and familiar, but at the same time it's a new experience too. We were together for a long time before we had Allie and we've spent lots of time together with Allie since, but not as a couple. I've found that combining those two things and melding it together has been a bit strange. You know, like we're not used to kissing with a member of the audience telling us to stop it because she thinks it's yucky and we're not used another little person worming her way between us when we're hugging and stuff. Not to mention hot dates and romantic evenings are a thing of the past."

My brother laughs out loud and I know that I have gone to the wrong person if I have been wanting any sympathy.

"That's hilarious... But seriously, sometime I can spend a night spoiling my little niece rotten, build my rapport as her favourite uncle and let you guys have a date night out away from your spawn."

"Well I won't say no to that, Ky, just as long as you don't drop the idea considering you're the only uncle she has."

Kyle laughs at my reminder, before the two of us are interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by a softer, weaker knock that I know is the work of my daughter trying to imitate her father's initial door knock.

"Sounds like Miss A is still awake! I'll get that for you" my older brother offers, jumping off his seat on the lounge before I have the chance to grant him permission to do so.

I stay seated, hearing the door open, hearing a laugh, a 'sorry!' and a 'hi Uncle Kyle!'

... Even without seeing the dialogue being carried out, I can immediately guess which has been said by my boyfriend, which has been said (or laughed) by my brother and most obviously, which has been said by my daughter.

After entering our house, I can immediately hear Allie blazing towards me through the hallway, way before I can even see her running over with her arms wide open to me.

"Mumma!" Allie exclaims excitedly as I catch my daughter in my arms, pulling her onto my lap for a cuddle.

I press a kiss to her hair easily from where her little arms are slung around my neck. "I missed you, beautiful girl."

I smile as I hear the suppressed giggle from her little head and mouth that is cradled into my neck, before the boys enter the room consecutively, seconds later.

"Bella... Your boyfriend was trying to kiss me!" Kyle cackles in amusement as he walks back over to the living room area of my apartment where Allie and I are. Will trails behind him, blushing, with reddened cheeks, looking more uncomfortable than I've seen him in a long time.

"Um, do I want to ask?"

Will, whose facial colour was reaching a deeper shade of red with every second that passes, speaks up in defense of himself.

"I assumed you would be answering the door, Bells! No one else has ever opened that door to me for as long as I can remember..."

"Yeah, 'eager-beaver' over there hadn't even waited for the door to be opened before trying to plant one on you, or in this case, me."

Listening to the boys and the predicament that they had found themselves in, I burst out laughing. "What? Is that your weird-as attempt to spice up our love life or something, Will?! That's so wrong that it's almost Freudian!"

My brother immediately joins me in laughing and seeing the funny side of the situation while Will's cheeks resemble the red of burning coals as he stands on the other side of the room, looking down at the floor with embarrassment.

However our laughter and amusement is short lived after hearing a small voice speak.

"I feel really yucky."

I look down to Allie from where she still is in my arms. However, this time I notice the frightening fact that she has paled completely since I last looked at her, only a minute or two earlier.

Her usual crystal blue have darkened to a murky grey as she tosses her head about, like she doesn't know what to do with herself. It is one of the most horrible things to see my daughter that unwell, worse than I can ever recall seeing her.

"Will? I thought you said she had been improving!" I exclaim worriedly about the little girl who can only be said as appearing to be the total opposite of 'improving'.

Will hurries over to my side, gently laying a hand to our daughter's forehead. Any embarrassment from before is gone and totally pushed aside by parental concern.

"She's heating up again. What was happening while she was with me was that she'd get really, really hot but look really cold and sickly. Then she would look like she's burning up, but feel like she's been sitting in a freezer for a few hours."

"What? So it's like a fever or something?"

Will nods, pressing a kiss to our sickly daughter's forehead.

"Yeah, basically like a fever, but worse. Then she started getting a horrible rash too... I don't know whether we should take her to the hospital to get it checked out or not."

"I don't know..." I frown uncertainly, before continuing to explain my indecision. "Maybe we should do a bit of research, see if we can find any information on this and on her symptoms before we take her to see a doctor. We could even call Lewis. He might have read or

heard of something on this before?"

We agree with the plan of attack and begin to set it into action, as quickly as we can, knowing that every passing minute is costing us and affecting our poor daughter in her pain and discomfort.

* * *

><p>One hour long phone call to Lewis and about 7 Google searches of 40 different websites later and we had gotten absolutely nowhere. Not only is Allie's symptoms unable to be deduced to anything or any medical condition in particular, but there is also no mythological explanation of her sickness either.<p>

We are getting nowhere, while Allie is only getting worse.

Eventually, Will and I have no option but to make a choice.

... It is down to either risking our daughter's health and potentially her life, or risking the exposure of Allie, my own and the other girl's mer-secret.

Honestly, that is one of the hardest calls and decisions that I have ever had to make. I had to decide between either being willing to put the secret that each of us girls had held so close, so tight and so secret for so long on the line or whether to risk my daughter's life, the life I would give my own up for if it ever meant the difference saving her.

Although I knew what the final outcome would be all along and that Allie's life comes down to being so, so much more importance than a fishy secret, it didn't make putting that secret on the line any easier. What point would there be in keeping a secret if it was sacrificed by poor health or death anyway?

Over the last few minutes she has been whining to scratch her rash which I have had to restrain her from doing, knowing it not only wouldn't ease her pain, but that there is also a chance it would bleed and create a scab if she kept scratching or itching.

However, after Will and I made the unanimous, mutual decision to take her into the hospital for medical attention, I realise that we need to collect a few of her things and prepare for the trip in, knowing that it would be for an uncertain and indefinite amount of time. I hand Allie over to her uncle, to enable Will and I flee the room to prepare and pack.

"Make sure she doesn't scratch her rash" are my parting words to my brother as much as they are directed as my daughter. Even as I begin packing a few things two rooms over I can still hear poor Allie's whines at her irritation and I hear him not allowing her to do so, telling her not to touch or scratch her skin.

"But I WANT to scratch it, Uncle Kyle! It hurts me!"

Eventually, after Will and I have finished picking up every, single, little thing that may even just possibly come in handy, we return to the lounge room, where low and behold, Allie is scratching herself. I can already see the visible and increased redness from the

additional irritation she is causing herself, which her uncle is allowing.

"Kyle! I told you not to let her itch herself!"

"I didn't!" He retorts instantly, while I just roll my eyes at the lie, having walked into the room and having seen it with my own eyes. I take Allie's hands that are busily scratching her skin, taking them into my own hands before picking her up.

"Look after the house while I'm gone, please. I'll keep you updated. Bye Kyle" I say simply and quickly, before hurrying Allie out of the house, with Will trailing behind us holding mine and Allie's belongings that we are taking with us for the trip into the hospital.

* * *

><p>The drive to the hospital seems to last a hundred times longer than usual, in between having to fight with my daughter to stop her from scratching her skin in the natural inclination to try and ease her pain, as well as dealing with the bad feeling in my own stomach that I can feel sink deeper and deeper with every passing minute.<p>

Eventually we make it to the hospital and out to the reception desk of the emergency ward, where we are advised and directed to head straight for the pediatric ward on level 2 of the hospital. The nurses reaction and urgency in her reply just confirms my sinking fears of the seriousness of my daughter's unknown condition.

As I continue through the hospital, with Will and Allie all I do is focus on following the directions that we had been given by the receptionist with the goal of reaching our destination, as quickly as possible weaving our way through the maternity, prenatal and antenatal sections of the second floor to try and find our way to the pediatric section of the hospital, through the confusing rabbit-warren design.

What I don't realise is that my tunnel-vision is so intense and so focused on my environment that I barely notice the three nurses and two other couples that have already walked passed us. I don't realise any of my surroundings until finally, I am about to obliviously pass my ex-boyfriend in the hospital corridors too... Until the thing that I do still recognize, my name, is called out.

"Bella! Hi..."

* * *

><p>So Daniel the Spaniel is back... Will, Bella and Daniel confined to a hallway together is bound to cause an awkward moment or two!

**Anyway, what are my lovely readers thoughts on this chapter? The bond between Kyle and Bella? What's up with Allie's unknown illness? Will almost becoming far better acquainted with his girlfriend's brother than intended? Daniel's return? Why is he in the hospital too? Absolutely anything your mind can conjure up about this chapter, let me know by clicking the pretty little review button below.

**

165 reviews from _you_ = new chapter from _me._ :)

Next chapter: Not one, not two, but _three_ characters find themselves on the wrong side of the law (and that ain't even all the law-breaking we're going to see for this story!). Who is it and what on earth could they possibly doing? Not to mention, will they get caught?

14. Boy Made Good?

**Hey all. I think it's time for a new chapter! I was hoping to get this up sooner, but much like the rest of this year, had so much going on in between the last update and now... Been interstate with a big group of friends for a quick holiday, some friend's have got engaged and a close family friend had a baby (so it's like having a new baby sibling for me hehe!). **

Thank you so very much to all the lovely people who took the time out to read and review my last chapter! Perhaps it's just me, but it seemed like a lot of reviews were quite long last chapter, so an even bigger thank you to the people who contributed to that. Reviews are always such a pleasure to read and they give me so much to go off of.

Anyway, enjoy the new chapter and the rest of your day! I'm off for a girls night before the annual Royal State Show tomorrow (A.K.A. the highlight of my year. Showbags and rides can win me over any day - I'm such a child at heart)!

* * *

><p>Chapter **Fourteen**** â€" ****Boy Made Good?**

Will's POV:_

Previously:_My tunnel-vision is so intense and focused on my environment that I barely notice the three nurses and two other couples that walk past us; until finally, I am about to obliviously pass my ex-boyfriend in the hospital corridors too... That is until the thing I do recognize, my name, is called out. _

"Bella! Hi..."

* * *

><p>In the corridor, Bella and I have been walking hand-in-hand through the maze of doors and walls, through the different wards on our way to reaching the pediatric ward we are looking for. We are there for Allie who is nestled in my arms and where I can feel her body temperature dropping to dangerously low, before heating up to boiling hot for intervals of time.<p>

However, Allie isn't my only concern anymore as Bella and I stand opposite my girlfriend's ex-boyfriend. Her formerly abusive and unstable _boyfriend_, might I add. In a small way of being able to protect and defend my girls, I hold onto Allie a little tighter than

what I have been and I increase my hold of Bella's hand, turning it into an arm that I wrap around her.

"Dan... W-wh-" Bella says in incomplete words, in a small voice, not much louder than a whisper, even though I can tell she is trying to ask what he is doing here.

"What are you doing, Dan? In here? This is a hospital... Are you alright?" Bella asks, finally managing to speak and get her complete question out.

Before giving my girlfriend, his former girlfriend, an answer, he just smiles as he looks around the hallway to take in the environment that not so many people find to be desirable.

"I am doing well, thanks... Really great actually - thanks to you, Bella. Every single day I still regret my role in our relationship and the way I treated you, you know? I am still so sorry. However I'm actually working here in the hospital. It's not a paid job, but I'm just volunteering in the pediatric ward. I do things like dress up as a clown for some of the sick kids, talk to and provide support for the kid's parents and I arrange little excursions or internal activities like face painting -things like that- for some of the kids that are stuck in here. It's so rewarding here. I love it."

After listening to Daniel's whole 'warm and gooey' recounted explanation of his new volunteering job, there is one big question that stands out in my mind immediately. I want to know how the hell that he could have possibly had the Government or Police security clearance to work at or help out in a hospital -a _children's_ hospital at that- when he had been in a ward of his own -a psychiatric ward- the last time that I had seen him.

I should have more trust in two of my girlfriend's to know that my internal question would not go unanswered for very long when I know that she is more than capable of talking (or babbling on) and asking questions to satisfy her prevalent curiosities.

"So how come you're able to work here with your um, criminal record, if you don't mind me asking" Bella questions Daniel as my grasp on my sick daughter in my arms tightens a little more once again at the reminder of the series of events from three years back, all of which led up to my little girl being kidnapped by the man standing in front of us.

"It's all under these ridiculously water-tight and high-security conditions. Honestly, I would list them and explain a few of them, but there are so many different rules and they are so intricate that it would take me all day to tell you them all! Basically, my gig is like a community service initiative for re-introducing people like me into society after doing time inside. If I mess up with this volunteering, then it's straight back to jail or some sort of serious consequence like that - it's very high responsibility and punishment. Not to mention all the mental and physical tests you have to go through; it's worse than a council job!"

Looking between Bella and Daniel, the interactions and the discussion between the ex-lovers who have experienced a very complicated and tumultuous relationship in the past, I can't help but feel a little bit uncomfortable standing in the midst and middle of the two who are

seeing each other for the first time since the day that Bella had stopped Dan from committing suicide years ago.

There is an awkward silence and Bella looks a little bewildered as though she has completely forgotten why or what we are doing here in the first place. So, I give her shoulder a gentle and comforting squeeze, while Daniel looks at something hanging up high and over our heads, before returning his gaze to our close embrace while I am preoccupied with keeping Allie and Bella as close to me as possible.

"So what about you guys? How have you been? Are you two back together? And Allie... I cannot believe how big that girl has gotten since I saw her last! She would have just turned what, four, recently, right?"

Bella and I share an unspoken communication as if to ask or say who is going to answer back to the question that has just been directed at both of us, before I speak up.

"We're good, thanks. Yeah we've just started seeing each other again recently. She turned four last month."

"Glad to hear it! Oh and I see its congratulations on number two, by the way."

Bella and I share another exchange of oblivion between our shared glances, checking whether the other knew what is being referred to, or not, in our case.

"Number two what?" I ask on behalf of both of our puzzlement, trying to put two and two together to understand what Daniel means. Maybe he isn't quite as mentally stable as I had first thought that he had become...

"_Baby_ number two... right? What else would you two be doing in the maternity ward?"

While the man in front of me had initially seemed confident in his assumptions and congratulations, I can see as the uncertainty floods over him. For good reason.

Meanwhile, at the same time Bella is desperately sending me 'as if' signals with an eye roll.

Ironically, while everyone is busy - Daniel is trying to work out and decode what part of his reasoning or conclusion he had got so badly wrong, Bella is busy giving me eye-messages and while my own head is darting back and forth between looking at the two of them, however it is the littlest person who hasn't spoken one word since arriving at the hospital, let alone since seeing Daniel in the corridor who is the one to speak up.

"A baby? Really?!"

Even despite my little girl's sickness and weakening effects that have been taking a toll on her little body, I can hear the excitement in her voice. It is the same as when she is given or allowed a special treat or when she asks for her favourite movie to be watched.

"No sweetheart" I whisper simply, pressing a kiss to Allie's hair as her head falls back down onto my shoulder, as though lifting her head up and asking the three word question about our conversation had taken up and absorbed all her diminishing energy.

All the while, the awkwardness of the question still hasn't resulted in an actual answer to Daniel.

"No way. I'm not pregnant again, Dan. One kid is great, but two? ... Do I look like I'm about to kill myself?!" I can tell that Bella is trying to light-heartedly laugh and use humour to defuse the awkwardness, but as soon as the words leave her mouth she claps her own hands over it. However, it's too late to take her careless wording back and I can see she knows the mistake of her terminology.

Yet another increasingly uncomfortable and awkward silence falls over the corridor and over the four of us who are currently standing in the middle of it, before Bella transitions into her motor-mouth mode to attempt to compensate and resolve the mistake she just made.

"Oh my gosh, Dan. I just didn't think. I am so sorry. That was terribly insensitive of me. I didn't mean it like that..."

"Don't stress. That was a long time ago. I've covered a lot of ground in that time. I'm not going to break down at the mention of suicide, Bella. And I get your point. Stupid assumption. No baby's on the cards or currently being cooked. So what are you guys doing here anyway, then?"

In the time between Daniel posing the question and Bella answering it, the other man looks above our head again as I follow his gaze to the large blue 'MATERNITY WARD' sign that is hanging above our heads, explaining a lot of the awkward confusion based off of incorrect assumptions.

"I'm not too sure of the layout of the hospital, but from the directions we've been given by the receptionist, I assume we had to walk through the maternity ward to get to the pediatric one. We're here for Allie. She isn't well."

I can see the look of genuine concern spread across Daniel's face. I can recognize it so accurately because I know that it resembles my own reaction when I first noticed that my daughter is sick, as well as when Bella and I had taken notice of her condition worsening.

"Here?! Are you sure that's safe for her? Did you think about what could happen if they run tests? What they could find?"

"Yeah... It's a risk we have to take. She's been getting worse."

Daniel nods, at Bella in particular, before trying to look at Allie who is well hidden in my arms, with her back facing Dan as her head snuggled in somewhere in my shoulder or over it.

"Poor girl... What's wrong with her?"

"We're not too sure exactly what's up, but she's had a bit of a strange twist on a fever and this rash that comes and goes. She'll get really hot or really cold, but whatever she looks like she's feeling, her temperature is actually the opposite. She goes pale when she heats up or bright red when she's shivering cold. It's a bit of a worry."

As Bella explains our daughter's illness, I check her for her extreme temperature now, feeling her forehead. Allie has been slightly cold, coming out of her extreme phase of being chilled for an hour or so before that, but now I can feel her little body has transitioned to feeling so hot that I can even feel the stickiness of my shirt sticking to my body underneath where Allie is lying on me. The hard thing to understand is that even though she feels like a heater or like burning embers of wood nestled in my arms, she still looks so pale.

"So were you guys here to get Allie medication or to run tests or something?"

"Because it has all been such a sudden thing, we haven't had very much time to talk about it and sort out a plan, but basically, we just want to make sure that whatever this is isn't life-threatening. Basically, we want to avoid blood tests or anything like from being run, for the obvious reasons, but just make sure she's going to be okay" Bella explained, shooting a few worried looks over to our daughter in my arms as she provided Daniel with an explanation.

Yet another silence ensues and I am about to suggest to Bella that we should remember why we are here at the hospital in the first place. We are here for Allie's sake to both try to resolve whatever is wrong with our little girl or in the very least find out what is wrong and make sure that she would be okay. We aren't here to have a good old catch up with her ex-boyfriend.

"I think I can help you. I think I can help Allie. Trust me... I want to make this right."

I can't say that I know Daniel all that well at all. If anything, we have just passed the level of acquaintances. However, with his almost pleaded request for Bella and I to trust him, I feel an odd and uncomfortable feeling wash over me.

I have no idea what Daniel thought that he can do to help us, to help Allie, but I have a bad feeling and really, is it unreasonable for me to feel as though I would never be able to trust the bloke? The last time I saw him, I had made amends and thanked him for being there as a father for Allie when I hadn't been there. But the times before that, he'd kidnapped my daughter and almost killed himself after Bella left him, ending their abusive relationship.

"What do you mean? How could you help her?" Bella questions, giving me a cautious glance.

"Well, just know that it would mean bending a few rules. But, I can get access to medication which can help her temporarily and then I can run a few tests for you, bypassing the pathology lab and doctors."

I'm not a doctor, or a practitioner or even a nurse. My background

and experience with the health and medicinal industry consists of my ability to apply a band-aid, measure out the correct amount of medicine accurately into one of the provided measuring cups and to be able to take my own or somebody else's temperature with the use of a thermometer. Needless to say, anyone who claims that I can be considered a medical professional must have lost their marbles. However, from my basic and humble knowledge of the medical industry, every inch of me is screaming out and telling me how wrong Daniel's idea sounded.

Pathology and lab testing meant accuracy and proper diagnoses or prognoses, while doctors mean dealing with and handling whatever the pathology labs testing was telling them. Skipping those steps, especially when the three of us are anything but medical experts, seems completely wrong. Not to mention, completely _illegal_.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, mate, but when you say 'bending the rules', you just mean 'breaking the law', right?"

While the man in front of me hesitantly nods slowly, out of the corner of my eye I also see my girlfriend contributing to the answer with a nod, as if questioning how I could possibly have reached any other conclusion.

"No. No way. I'm not a bad boy. I'm not breaking the law. I can't do this. Bella and I are no good to Allie if the two of us wind up in jail!"

"What's the alternative, Will? Would you rather risk Allie's life or risk Allie's, and us other girls, secret? What good are we to Allie in jail or not if she doesn't get better?"

I have no answer to that. Under every circumstance, in any thought and in any scenario, my daughter's life was the most important and my paramount priority. And Bella knows it.

I would do anything for Allie.

However, I had just never imagined that safeguarding my daughter's life would come down to determining whether I want to stay on the right side or the wrong side of the law.

"Fine..." I scowl unhappily to ensure that my stance and attitude of this situation is well known to the other two.

It feels like being stuck between a rock and a hard place in regards to what decisions I have. I certainly am not doing this willingly. The two potential outcomes are that there is the risk of my daughter's health worsening or the alternative that anyone and any doctors discovering her genetically-inherited secret could set her and possibly her mother up for a life in an enclosure at a theme park if she is exposed. If it isn't for the fact that either one of those risks could sentence my daughter to unimaginably terrible outcomes, I wouldn't ever even be considering to break the law. Let alone be about to do it.

"I don't know if I want any tests to be run on her, especially not by _you_, sorry, but is there at least something that can help her out for the time being? Some medication or relief or something?" I

question Daniel, glancing over to Bella, who shoots me a nod of agreement, to ensure that we are aware of being on the same page.

Daniel nods, pressing a finger to his lips as the universal gesture to be quiet or silent, before signalling for us to follow him further down the corridor. Bella follows his lead first, before I start and catch up a few moments later, continuing to carry Allie around the hospital.

We reach a locked door to the hospital's staff room which Daniel obviously has access to, telling us to wait there while he sneaks inside quickly, closing the door behind him. Under a minute later, Daniel exits the room that seems quite small from the exterior, holding a box. Then, oddly he walks off, straight past Bella and I, into a room before walking out, back over to us very quickly after. However, upon returning, he seemingly appears to be holding nothing.

"Sorry about that. There are cameras around here. They only record picture, not sound though. I needed to make it look like I was just checking something. Anyway, there was a kid here about a fortnight ago that sounded like he had a similar thing to Allie with a fluctuating temperature that kept going up and down, just not quite as extreme. The doctor gave his parents this. It's normally a prescription medicine from the doctor, or they can supply it here in here if it's a serious enough situation. She should only need it for a week. The amounts and information is all detailed on the box."

Bella looks at me and then over at Daniel oddly.

"Um. What medicine, Dan? What did you do with it?"

"Trust me... Come here, give me a hug" he replies strangely. It is only when he opens his arms to her when I see a flicker of white in the sleeve of his long shirt. Instantly, I can foretell what manoeuvre he is trying to execute.

My girlfriend looks over to me for a non-verbal approval that I am okay with her moving into the arms of her ex-boyfriend. I'm not okay with it, but I nod anyway.

Painfully, I witness the closing gap and reduction of space between Bella and Daniel. Her hands rest on the top of his back, just below his shoulder blades, while his hands are far more adventurous. Initially his arms snake around her waist, into and between the layer that separates her coral pink camisole shirt from her short sleeved trench coat jacket.

For the task at hand, Bella's clothing is unintentionally perfect. The very top few inches of her jeans are covered by the short sleeve jacket that wouldn't be keeping her very warm anyway. Aside from the slight movement and imprint of a hand moving around at the very top of her jeans and backside, the medication is unable to be seen or identified as being planted. Still, I quickly look away, not wanting to think too hard or use my imagination to think about where Daniel's hands may have ended up during that process. Instead, I try to cease my pang of jealous discomfort at the purposeful embrace between the former lovers by focusing on my daughter in my arms, pressing a kiss

to my little girl's head who had fallen asleep at some point.

Eventually the two retract and pull away from the hug with each other and instantly I feel that little bit more at ease, especially after what I could hear from where I am standing as he had started to whisper into her hair: "I'm so sorry, Bella. I haven't spent one day not thinking about how sorry I am."

I am thankful once the two separate and I am even more thankful when my girls and I separate from him altogether, leaving to return to Bella's apartment.

* * *

><p>"We smuggled prescription medication out of the hospital, Bella! We broke the law!"<p>

"I know that we did. But it was for Allie and I would do it all over again if I had to."

Arriving back at Bella's apartment, the two of us are alone with Allie, while Kyle is out catching up with some new friends that he has already managed to make in his time here.

Since getting back, Bella has spent the time nagging me to trust Daniel and let Allie have the medicine already, while I have spent every minute trying to gather up as much information as I can on the medicine we had been given, any cases of it being used and any bad cases of it or whether or not it has any side effects. Within half an hour, I probably could have written a book on the stuff.

Fortunately, and on the contrary to my expectations, all the searches I have made and all the information I have found to see if the medicine is discreditable in any way or not was turning up blank.

"Fine. She can have the medication but if she has a few doses of it and she doesn't get any better, or, if she gets worse we are taking her off them _immediately_."

She nods (but not without rolling her eyes first) and grabs the box that had been slipped into the back of her jeans earlier that day before checking the quantity that is recommended for our four year old daughter.

"That's fine. I'm okay with that. But what are we going to do about the tests? I'm really worried that whatever is wrong with her is more of a long term problem... Do you trust him enough to try and work out what's wrong with Allie?"

"No way, no. I am not giving him even just an ounce of evidence that could prove that Allie's a mermaid. We'll contact Lewis and see if he knows enough to be able to do it. It might not be 100% accurate, but you know that he would be happy doing more research to try and teach himself how to if he can't."

After feeding our daughter who is bundled in blankets, watching a movie on the smaller lounge and ensuring that she had ingested the

medicine, Bella joins me on the lounge I am sitting on resting a hand above my knee.

"Listen, Will. I get what you're saying. He broke my trust in him badly, remember? But, unless you think I was mental from the day that I started dating him, the Daniel we saw today is almost exactly like the Dan that I had first fallen in love with. Just like he changed for the worse in the time that I was with him, I honestly believe that he's changed for the better since then, too. Heck, he put himself on the line just to get us some medicine so that we could avoid a doctor and all the tests that go with needing a prescription for the medicine he gave us. Even if we were caught, the consequences for him with all of his high stakes conditions would have been way worse than what they would be for us. You heard what he'd been telling us about how if he stepped one foot wrong at the hospital, he could land back in jail, let alone what would happen if they caught him breaking the law there. And even when I was with him and even through the worst of it, he never, ever mistreated Allie or treated her poorly, so why would he now?"

I let out a pent-up sigh. It is completely frustrating that when I want nothing more than for Allie to be safe and secure, that there is no way to achieve that.

Lewis would be perfect to run the tests, someone both Bella and I can be confident in knowing that any evidence of Allie would stay safe. But although Lewis would be able to run the tests, he has previously admitted that diagnosing Allie and trying to determine her sickness is way out of his depth. Then again, for any normal parent taking your kid to a professional and to see a doctor would be the automatic option. However, when your child is a mermaid, that is not such a feasible option. Then there's Daniel, who already knows about Allie and with access to professionals and everything we needed, he would have been the perfect option. If it isn't for the fact that he is my girlfriend's abusive ex-boyfriend who's done stints in both a mental hospital, as well as jail; someone I don't really ever want to rely on and trust.

"Let's just take this as it comes and choose the best way to ride this out when the time comes. Lewis might be able to find out more, or better yet, Allie might end up fine in a few days' time" I explain, pressing a kiss to the top of Bella's head that had somehow ended up on my chest. At the same time I shoot a glance over in my daughter's direction. She doesn't look any better and she looks stifflingly hot, meaning the poor girl is probably freezing again.

"There's got to be one way to ride this one out safely..."

* * *

><p>Well, some tough choices had to be made right there, hey? Who's envious of Bella & Will with their damned if they do, damned if they don't dilemma - ha ha? However, what is everyone's thoughts? Did they make the right call or what would you do better? And Daniel? What did you all think about his re-introduction? Who does or doesn't believe Daniel has turned a new leaf to bring his life around? And just like Wella, we're still no closer to knowing what is going on with Allie...

****179 reviews for the next chapter!****

****Next chapter: You don't want to miss the next one ;) Zane takes a bad day to an irreversible extreme after a fight with Rikki and a lunch with his dad goes badly, before it all hits the fan. ****In a 'game-changing' chapter, it will lead to ****devastating consequences for both himself and others... What does he do? ****

15. Body Blows

****Hey all. New chapter! Taken a little longer than I would have hoped, but I've been super busy of late and when I do visit my home, occasionally, I've been super addicted to One Tree Hill. ****

****In other news, author-me is one single chapter off of completing Far From Perfection 2! I can't believe it! Even more so, I can't wait to share what I have been working on with you all. ****

****Enjoy x****

*** * ***

><p>Chapter Fifteen â€" Body Blows

Zane's POV:

This is where it all begins, where it all goes downhill from and where, surprisingly, it is the best point of my day.

After returning home from work in a terrible mood after having had a bad day with business, as well as knowing that even despite clocking off at work, my luck is still going to reach a further low before it would get better.

... I know that I still have to meet up with my dad before the day is out, unless I am able to either arrange my own untimely death or find some reason to be hospitalised before I have to meet up with him. Even still, he wouldn't be happy.

"Hey. How was your day?"

The second I open up the door, Rikki greets me as she bellows out from the lounge room where she and Will are. Rikki is just lounging around; doing goodness knows what on her phone and meanwhile, Will looks like he is wanting to shoot himself, surrounded by a mountain of paperwork and confusion. He never really had been the studious type that would be happy spending all day indoors, especially not on paperwork.

"My day? It was a shocker. I don't especially want to remember it, dwell on it or spend any more time thinking about it, actually."

By failing to elaborate on my bad day and the terrible time I had had at work, I know that I would have to specifically request for my lack of details not to be addressed. My overly curious wife would especially be out for more information, which I am not in the right frame of mind to continue talking about and developing on currently.

"Alright... You can tell me about it later. But hey listen, can I talk to you in our room for a few minutes?" Rikki doesn't look even mildly pleased or amused about whatever she wants to address which means that I could almost guarantee the subject. Family.

"Talking? Is that what you're calling it now?"

Will's comment is only a joke; I know that even when I am not in the right frame of mind to view it lightly or to have a laugh about his interruption in our discussion.

"Shut up, Benjamin" my sharp and equally blunt response isn't hugely uncommon and I know that Will isn't going to go sulk in a corner for thinking that I am being mean to him. I am harsh to my best mate 90% of the time. However, most of the time and unlike today, both of us know I don't mean it. "How important is it, Rikki? I don't really have time right now."

"It won't take long, Zane. I promise."

Will smirks from his spot in the room, looking pleased with himself. "It never does, does it?"

I simply roll my eyes, my tolerance wearing thinner and thinner with every passing second. I succumb to Rikki's request, letting her take my hand and pull me up to our room, figuring it will be easier and faster to let Rikki talk to me about whatever she is so desperate or get off her chest, with the advantage of escaping Will and his innuendoes at the same time.

Reaching our room, Rikki trails behind me, shutting and pressing her back against the closed door after we both enter. Obviously, she has made a note of just how under the pump I am and just how much I don't want to be there for a casual chit-chat, considering how quickly she cuts to the chase.

"There's definitely something going on with Tam. I haven't narrowed it down to what it is exactly, yet, but there's definitely something."

"And what exactly do you want me to do about that?" I snap in a manner that in hindsight, is probably harsher than it should have been and could have been.

Rikki looks a little dumbfounded, even set back by the remark. "Well, um, she's my sister - your sister-in-law, you know. I'm just worried about her. I just thought that you might be too."

"Good for you. I understand that you are worried about her, but I've got enough of my own family problems going on without having to worry about your unnecessary overreactions that you're reading too much into about your sister, too. I'm going."

"Zane, I'm your wife... Doesn't that legally bind you to talk to me or something?!" Rikki retorts with frustration, starting off a little more light-hearted before she becomes more serious with her pleas. "Come on... You can't just run off whenever you're in a bad mood!"

Our individual fiery personalities and our individual passions is

what works to either make us, or, break us.

When we are good, we are very, very good together. There is never any shortage of sparks or fireworks in our relationship. However, when times are bad, those sparks become more of a flaming, blazing fire or resemble hand grenades; uncontrollable and far from concerned about what damage is done, or of what stands in the way.

"Run off? That makes it sound like I ****want**** to be going out to meet my dad. Frickin' hell Rikki, unlike some people, I don't just laze around, running off for lunch reservations for after work drinks. And like you'd know what the real world is like! It's quite a different place from 'fantasy mermaid world'. All you do is take a few photos-or a do a touch of editing here and there. Geez, that's not rocket science and then the rest of your days are filled with coffees with Cleo, swims with Bella and incessant worrying about Tam..."

"Jerk. Lounge is all yours tonight. And like you'd have no idea what it's like sitting around until you are 18, doing nothing while daddy is off paying for your to bankrupt cafes or abandon people in Zodiacs..." with every word that Rikki spits at me, I can see her getting more and more worked up, until she snaps and stops herself.

"Actually, no. You know what? I don't want to talk to you about this anymore - I'm wasting my breath. I forgot how hard it is to get care and compassion out of someone so damn self-absorbed." With that, Rikki crosses her arms, shoots me a dirty look and walks out the room.

I wait a few seconds so that it doesn't seem to her like I am following on after her when I walk out of our shared bedroom.

After both leaving our room, post-fight, Rikki returns to the living area to most likely sulk on her phone, while I walk straight past the archway that opens into our main communal space. Instead, I walk over to the front door to leave the house and make my way to meet up with my father in the worst possible headspace. Mind you, seeing my dad is possibly my least favourite thing to do, ever, even at the best of times, let alone when I am in such a down-and-out raging headspace at the current time...

* * *

><p>The lavish beach-front restaurantbar is decked out for happy hour. It is classy, it is exclusive, it is overdone and it oozes the depiction of the expensive establishment that it is.

All in all, it is society and it is nothing less than what I would expect from my father.

"Son, it's good to see you. Apologies for our less than pleasant encounter last week. You can imagine that that wasn't exactly what I had expected to walk into."

I don't reply to that when I know for a fact that he doesn't mean his faux apology, even in the least.

Instead, I absorb myself with the drinks menu, trying to find the

most expensive beverage, whether I fancy it or not. That is the only marginally 'okay' thing about being with my father - it means that he and his credit card will be paying for it. It's the price paid for me to sit through the painfully torturous meeting.

"So, you wanted to meet up? Was there intended to be any other purpose for that, other than buying me drinks?"

"What? Is it a crime to want to spend some time with my only child? I thought it would be nice for us to spend some time together while I am here. It's not like we call or email each other and I figured that touching base would be good considering I do still care about you and your life, contrary to popular belief..."

Fortunately, we are interrupted by a waiter, asking for any drink requests. Having to talk to my father soberly is not my favourite thing to do, but I know that I have to soldier on, at least until my saving grace arrives.

"So how has business been? I hear most companies on the coast have been on a bit of a rise? Bull market? I have every faith and certainty if I taught you a thing or two; you are matching that rise and more and more than most..." my father questions critically. From the moment the questions are posed to me, I know that I won't be giving him an honest answer.

"Of course. We are matching the best-of-the-best in the rise. We Bennett's have a reputation to uphold in the business world. How would I be managing the business in any other way?"

I don't have it in me, nor do I know how to tell him that my bad day that I have brought home with me after work is because of the fact that the business is doing very, very differently to his impressions and expectations of it.

My father's smiley, pleasant demeanour that is cast to fool clients and employees, but not me, snaps away the second that he reveals that he had just trapped and ensnared me with my own lie. He should know what it's like. You never willingly admit that you're running into trouble.

"Don't lie to me, Zane. I've seen paperwork; I've heard it all through the grapevine. It's not pretty. History is repeating itself. It's your pathetic little teenage cafe that you tried to run all over again. You're sinking yet another ship."

I had been baited and I had been snared, but I am not about to go and start telling the truth just yet, admitting defeat. Especially not to my father.

"The business and the industry as a whole have had a bit of a slow year. Nothing we can't recover and bounce back from though. I know how I'll be able to lead it onwards and upwards."

"You've had a 23% decrease in the last quarter alone, Zane! It would have to be the greatest comeback since Lazarus! I'd like to see you try..."

I need that drink. This second.

"I knew that coming here is a big mistake. Before I go, is there anything else that you want to have a go at me for?!" I hypothetically question, before listing off more hypothetical answers. "My choice of friends? My fashion sense? What time I get out of bed in the morning? Ooh, I have a good one; what about my partner? That one will keep you busy for a while."

"I assumed you are with 'Miss Trailer Trash' again when I saw her at the house. But, my next question is why? I thought your tastes were improving to the finer things in life after your post high school years."

Right on time and not a second too soon, my drink arrives in front of me. My hands meet the cup very quickly, before my lips consume the contents in one warm hit that burns my throat warmly, comfortingly on its way down. For its price, that drink probably should have been enveloped in numerous carats of gold and I probably should have savoured the liquid instead of taking it in one hit, before demanding another to be in front of me, promptly.

"Guess what? 'Miss Trailer Trash' is now actually 'Mrs. Bennett'. We're married, so you might want to improve your attitude on your new daughter-in-law."

"Married?! Are you insane?! Or is this your heinously cruel attempt to give me a heart attack?! Either way, you've lost your mind, Zane!"

I have been dreading breaking the news to my dad and I have even actually been tempted to see just how long I could have gone on without him finding out. However, now that I am here, in the moment and telling him, there is actually something evilly satisfying about telling my father...

I know he isn't happy about my marriage. I didn't have to see his reaction to predict that. I know he has never been Rikki's number one fan. However, I also have the satisfaction of knowing that there is absolutely nothing that he can do about it.

"I'm not kidding, dad. We eloped a few weeks ago while we were in Sydney. You obviously didn't notice my wedding band" I smirk, giving him a quick flash of my left hand. I am glad that I had opted for leaving it on after an initial temptation to take it off in case it caught my dad onto my marriage before I'd had a chance to say something about it. "And you know what? I think I've had enough of you and your disapproval of every single thing in my life. Whatever. I met up with you, happy?! Now I don't want to see or hear from you for another few years or so, thanks."

Leaving that bar, I only have one regret in the argument and the loggerheads that my father and I had been at, which ended in me leaving prematurely. The only thing I regret is walking away before I can have my second drink.

* * *

><p>Storming outside and as far away from that establishment as possible, I am sure that the wind on my face and the fresh-sea breeze is refreshing, rejuvenating and exactly what I need after the day that I have had.<p>

All is picturesque, beautiful and serene as I walk along the path between the beach and Broadbeach Boulevard, further and further away from the high-class bar that I had fled from.

Up ahead is the pretty impressive children's playground that overlooks the beach. It isn't far from Bella's apartment and I have actually used it and had a go on it a couple of times after taking Allie there with either Will or Rikki.

Normally it is either filled with primary school aged kids, or dodgy teenagers who think themselves 'cool' for using a playground to hang out, or groups of mothers who will dump their kids there to play while they occupy themselves with coffees and chats.

Surprisingly, the playground seems rather more isolated than normal with only two people I can see there from my view of the playground afar. They don't seem to be there for the purpose of or with any intentions to use the playground, appearing to simply be conversing while sharing a bench.

They aren't primary school kids. They aren't teenagers. They aren't mothers groups. However, just because they don't meet the stereotypical criteria does not mean that there is anything wrong with this... until I near the playground.

Getting closer and closer to the two people sitting together, I slowly recognise the identities of the two people more and more with every step I take towards them and towards the playground.

"Bella?!" I choke, feeling even more enraged after realising that it was my best mate's girlfriend sitting alone with her ex-boyfriend. Her abusive ex-boyfriend.

"Oh hey, Zane" she smiles, until I walk nearer and nearer to her and the man with her, bringing my clenched fist and the rage I bear along with me.

There is a loud gasp and an even louder groan as my hand meets the guy whose face I have been wanting to punch for a very, very long time.

"What the hell are you doing, Bella?! Does Will know what you're up to?! And with him?!" I question in disgust, hissing in a tone that is just a few decibels lower than a shout.

"It's nothing, Zane! Calm down! Will knows we were meeting up!"

I roll my eyes, holding my knuckles that have began to redden since I threw the first punch to the man who is still recovering, clutching his jaw and trying to examine the damage that has been done to his lips and the lower part of his mouth. "Right, because I'm sure that Will would approve of you two's lonely rendezvous' at dusk!"

"Walk away, man! It's a misunderstanding and you're overreacting!" Daniel finally says, pulling himself up from the ground to stand and look me square in the eye.

"Shut up! I don't listen to the scum of the earth like you."

Daniel reacts angrily, snatching the collar of my shirt up into his palm, ramming me backwards with force as I struggle to stay standing while being forced to move in reverse until I hit a pole which I believe is one of the legs of the swing set.

Bella quickly lodges her arms between our bodies before any more punches or swings can be made by either party.

"Dan! Zane! Cut it out - both of you! Zane, I met up with him to talk about Allie. He's trying to help us - Will and I! Lewis is meeting up with us any minute now too! Call Will now if you don't believe me or if you don't believe that he knows!"

All I can do is see red for the sake of Will; my best mate. I know that if roles were reversed and if it were Rikki out with an ex of hers, alone, I would be so far from comfortable with it, whether I knew about it or not.

We stand there; looking into each other's equally enraged eyes as brown meets blue. There are small pants coming from the both of us, from our similar flights of adrenaline where our tempers translate to violence. Daniel's fist is pressed firmly to my chest, still in the same position as he clutches my shirt, pinning me to the pole under his grasp.

"Whatcha gonna do? Hit me? Bash me up? ... Like you do to girls?"

My taunt results in the first reciprocated punch from Daniel, right to my right eye.

It hurts like hell, but I need to get back at him, I need to keep going and I realise as neither of us stops fighting or gives in, that he does too.

I don't know if it is just because of my unresolved issues over the whole Bella and Daniel situation that had stirred up the past with my feelings of how my own father had treated my mother similarly.

I don't know if it is just because I really, really hate Daniel.

I don't know if it is just because I am trying to have my best mate's back.

I don't know if it is just because I've had a really bad at work with my sinking business, because I'd fought with Rikki earlier in the day and because I had been forced to associate with my father.

I don't know what pushed me over the edge.

... All that I do know is that from that point on, all hell has well and truly broken loose within me...

I had well and truly reached the point of no return.

Fists are flying. Uncontrolled tempers are blazing. Rage is pouring out and motivating our violence, our fight spirit. There is no stopping either side of the outpour of violence from myself or Daniel.

Amongst the chaos and out of the corner of my eye, I see Bella make a

phone call that doesn't last long at all. However, what I don't think is to put two and two together as it all feels like everything begins to slow down from there and from that point on... But I can't stop. I can't stop the rage. I can't stop the energy and force being released from my fists.

Time floats through the air stagnantly as every millisecond drags on painfully.

The shrill cries of a woman are inescapable, but bizarrely just energise the fight with fists flying through the air and laying my final punch that knocks Daniel, my opposition, to the ground.

I hear the sickening thud and thump of a head meeting concrete. It almost seems to bounce as the impact causes the man on the ground's head to uncontrollably rock and sway and bounce side to side, up and down.

A quick glance to my right, which feels like an hour of watching, shows my best mate's girlfriend who stands to the sidelines of the fight, clutching her stomach, distraught. I see the distress and the fire that blazes in her eyes as she looks to me, incinerating me as our eyes briefly make contact.

The metallic smell of fresh blood, lingers through the air, battling against another fragrance that wafts and spread through the air. The smell of sweat that clings to my own nostrils too. The warm moisture reminds me of the adrenaline that had swept over me moments ago, all of which could have been mistaken for a life time ago.

To match the lingering odour in the atmosphere, I can taste the same iron-filled crimson liquid that had been the product of a defensive punch back, just minutes earlier. The hit had cut my lip, perhaps my mouth, but my minimal cuts and bruises are a reminder of how unscathed I had gone to escape the brawl with anything more than that. However, at the same time, it also reminds me of just how much worse I had inflicted as I look down to the man on the ground, eyes flickering as he barely moves.

My sense of smell is taken over by a noise that I hear, a cry out, as a yellow-shirt clad, blonde haired man runs straight past me from his direction that he had come from behind me. He runs straight past me and straight over to our upset mutual friend.

I had been wrong. The legitimacy of Bella's explanation only just comes to fruition now. Now... Now that it is too late.

The guy I have known for pretty much all of my life -the guy I have only come to be able to interact with and socialize with in recent years due to our wives friendship- shoots me a look that brings me all the way back to grade eight.

... Disappointment.

It brings me back to our year eight 'Australian inventions' group assignment in S&E.

I had been put with Lewis, Emma and Tiffany. My work ethic had been poorly lacking to say the least. I would stare at blank walls during class and I would never follow through with the work the others would

force me to promise that I'd do for homework. When the due date came, I handed up 500 words of work that I swore until I was blue in the face that it had been my own work, my own words despite the rest of my group's suspicions. However, when it came to the next lesson, when our teacher announced that the four of us had all received an automatic fail, due to 500 plagiarised words, there was no anger in Lewis's eyes. There'd been no sadness that his grades had been tainted. Instead, there had just been the look of overwhelming disappointment. bee

The thing is coming from a guy who I have an odd sort of respect for, disappointment felt and still feels harder to accept than any other emotion.

As he wraps his arms around a traumatized Bella, looking to the ground at what I have just done, he pulls his phone and presses three numbers that I don't need to see, connecting to a line that has already been called about the incident before returning to look at me with the same disappointment that thirteen year old Lewis McCartney had given thirteen year old me.

In the distance, after what seems like seconds and years all at the same time, I hear the squealing cry of sirens, red and blue lights blazing like a torch in the early onsets of dusk.

My heart pounds, thumping, increasing a beat as each of my senses open up to the scene playing out around me. The scene that I had created. The trauma I had caused.

The officers run, speeding past me. I can't focus in on the policemen. I can't see what they are holding. I can't hear the words that they are yelling out, the words that feel like they are for me.

It is all just one big blur. Like a mess that has been smeared everywhere incomprehensibly.

The next thing I know is that I feel the clunks of cold metal, slapped and shoved forcibly over my wrists, shut tight as they drag me away from the bloodbath that I had not only been a participant in, but that I had initiated.

My clammy hands exhibit my nervousness, my panic. My hands shake a little to keep in rhythm with my fastening, pounding heartbeats, deep within me.

I know it is all over. I am done for.

* * *

><p>So there you have Zane Bennett's downhill spiral. What did you think of that?! Looking back, this is a massive turning point for the story. There's still more and more twists and turns to come yet, but this certainly has some pretty massive implications.

**What did you all think of Zane's breakdown though? The fight with Rikki? Meeting with his father? Outburst at Daniel? **

**Next chapter: Rikki attempts to reach out to Tam and reach the

bottom of her bad feeling before learning of Zane's arrest. However, what is even more shocking than the arrest itself? **

**At least 190 reviews for the new chapter! **

16. For Better, Or Worse

**So sorry for the lack of updates and anything else on here. I haven't been on much social media at all of late. I got quite sick and I've had a number of personal things happening so everything kind of got thrown off balance for a while there. **

**Anyway, thank you for the feedback on the last chapter. I hope you enjoy the new one and the big game-changer in this one. **

* * *

><p>Chapter **Sixteen**** â€" ****For Better, Or Worse**

_Rikki's__ POV_

It is getting late. Zane still isn't home. Honestly though, I'm not at all surprised. In fact, a part of me isn't expecting to see him home tonight considering our fight earlier in the day... Our fight which had ended with me banishing him to the doghouse for the night.

I know he will be too stubborn, too proud to come home and have to sleep out on the couch and I wouldn't doubt him going so far as booking himself a hotel room for the night to avoid that lowly position post-fight.

Regardless of where Zane is and whether he will be coming home or not tonight doesn't change the fact that I'm not fussed either way. Tomorrow would be a different day and by then I'll probably be living with a fresh and different view and side of me, but tonight I have greater concerns than my sulking husband.

"Tam. Can we talk?"

I ask just after knocking my knuckles against the wood of the door-frame that matches the others that run along the hallway of the upper-storey of our share house. Unlike the closed doors of the bathroom and myself and Zane's rooms, or Will's which is half-open, half-closed, Tam's door is fully open, exposing her and her room to myself and any of our other housemate's who happen to waltz through the main thoroughfare of a hallway.

Although I had just knocked and although I had just asked for her permission to be invited in, I don't wait for an answer, knowing exactly what I want as I walk straight in and make myself right at home in my little sister's room.

"Come on in, Rikki. Please, make yourself comfortable..." Tam trails off sarcastically, with a roll of her eyes as she spins around from her desk to face me where I've just positioned myself stomach-first on her Queen single bed.

"Oh you know that I will girlie."

Tam obviously isn't impressed with me and my inconsiderate entrance. So, she expresses herself and her opinion clearly, but silently which she has no problem with portraying by giving me a simple, but efficient roll of her eyes in my direction.

"So can I help you? Or did you just forget that we do have a communal area for sitting and for conversation?"

I shrug with a slight smirk at knowing the fact that she isn't enjoying the situation as much as I am. It has always been one of those little things that I know I shouldn't get as much of a kick out of it as I do, but there is no stopping the fact that I do to feed the sinister side of me that lies deep down within everyone.

"Bit of both. Get over it. Anyway, I knew this isn't going to come up in the communal conversation, so I just figured that I needed to use a bit of initiative."

The fear and tremble in my little sister's face is undeniable and clear as crystal. "What are you talking about?"

This expression is the turning point for me in the conversations that I felt as though I was completely in control of. My humour and my lightheartedness is being discarded for the protective, big-sisterly approach that I never even really knew that I am in possession of deep within me.

"Are you alright, Tam? Lately you've just seemed so... just so, different... And not a good different. Are you okay? Is there anything going on that you'd like to talk to me about?"

"Really? That's all you wanted to talk about? Good. It's really nothing, no big deal."

I'm completely not convinced by any stretch of the imagination that all of her strangeness and all of her unusual attitudes could be so quickly and easily disregarded as 'no big deal'.

"So... What's going on? And don't bother lying and telling me that it's 'nothing' because I can tell that there's something."

The most genuine feeling and response I get to the question I ask which has been playing on my mind a lot lately is in the sigh that precedes my question.

"Honestly? I'm just a bit disappointed that Kyle's not my type. It's stupid, but it just kinda sucks being the only singleton when you guys all hang out together as a group, you know."

"Well that's a bit dramatic, don't you think Tim-Tam? Besides, Kyle's name isn't Tim so I would make your life a misery and highly disapprove of him as a potential future brother-in-law for me and as a match for you."

The Tim-Tam joke in reference to the chocolate biscuit, my sister name and a common male name had been an ongoing joke almost since the entire time that Tam had been a part of my own and my housemate's life.

"I'm sorry. It's just a little disheartening. I must admit that I got my hopes up a bit."

I roll my eyes at Tam's attitude to display my disapproval before I begin to spend time verbalising it.

"Dammit Tam. You're 18. You're still so young... You're barely walking and talking and you're already stressing over finding Mr. Right?! Heck, it turned out I threw mine away at that age until Zane boomeranged back to me."

"Well it's not my fault that you lot haven't exactly made it easier on me and my single status. Zane made up a 'single Pringle' song for me the other day and then there's the running and ongoing jokes of my doomed destiny to end up as a crazy cat lady spinster."

I do see what my sister was saying and I understand her detesting to it, I really do, but I still don't believe it. Not fully anyway. I still believe that there is more to the story than what meets the surface and more than what is seen at face value.

"Really Tam? That's all? I didn't think it bothered you that greatly... It's not that much of a big deal. You know that we're just joking with you and you know that everyone is always teasing each other."

"Yeah I know that Rikki! Like I said, it was stupid, okay? Why do you think that I didn't bring it up earlier? Just leave it alone."

I know that I am walking a fine line and I know that I am walking on eggshells at risk of being kicked out of her bedroom and the whole conversation becoming pointless.

"Tam? If there is something going on, you would tell me. Wouldn't you?"

"Of course you know that I would tell you Rikki. I'm an open book. What you see is what you get. No ifs, no buts, no maybes..."

I am still a little skeptical. I can't quite believe her and there is a marginal amount of disbelief and discredit to what she is saying. I might have believed her and what she is saying a year, even six months ago but it is slowly and gradually feeling like a mask, a cover or a safety blanket is attempting to be pulled over my eyes, giving me and everyone an illusion of the person who my sister is portraying she is.

Regardless of what I think is honest and what I think isn't the full truth, it doesn't change the fact that I still trust in my little sister... I just don't feel like Tam is being Tam, even to herself and that she isn't letting everyone else see the person that she is.

Our conversation is interrupted by a phone dial, the land-line home phone, begins to ring downstairs.

I know that Will is working late and Zane still isn't home so I know that either Tam or myself have to answer it. I quickly stand up and begin to rush out of the room before halting in the doorway.

"Don't think we've finished talking about this, madam. And don't forget that you can always talk to me, okay? I don't do gushy and blubbering feelings, but after being friends with people like Cleo for so long, I do do an open-door policy."

After delivering my parting words to my sister as quickly as I can, I race downstairs, trying to beat the clock before the phone would ring out and shoot through to the message bank after ringing for one dial tone too long.

While I know that it is a race to the phone and while I know that I really need to try and answer it, what I don't know as I snatch up the receiver into my hand and press it to my ear is just how so, so unprepared I am for what I am about to hear and the news that is going to change my life drastically from this point on...

* * *

><p>"Hello, it's Rikki" I manage to spit out as quickly as I can, unfortunately meaning the three words sound as they compiled into just one.<p>

"Rikki Bennett?"

I frown as I confirm my identity to the caller. It has to be something official. None of my closest family and friends would ever call me by my first and last name, although the paperwork had barely been submitted for my change in name after I'd spent a reasonable amount of time post-wedding debating whether to legally change, hyphenate or leave my name as is.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bennett. I'm Constable Adam Verona of the Surfers Paradise Police Station. I am just calling to inform you that your husband, Zane Bennett was involved in and is believed to have initiated an altercation this afternoon. He has since been arrested and has been taken under custody to the Palen Creek Correctional Centre."

"What? For what?! Are you sure? What do you think he has done?!"

"The arrest has been made for assault and bodily harm against Daniel Shapiro."

Dan. Dan is back? Since when? My husband has apparently beaten up the guy who had abused one of my best friends? Nothing is adding up. As far as I know, none of us - not me, not Bella, not Will, not Zane has seen Daniel since the night that everything had come to a head, the day he kidnapped Allie and prepared to kill himself around three years ago.

Now, the only thing that I know is that Zane had been jailed for assaulting him.

The phone call with the police officer doesn't last much longer as I struggled to construct sentences through my startled shock from the phone call. As I hang up, partly unknowingly, I realize that there are so many unanswered questions that I want and need to know the answer to which I really should have, but forgot to bring up during

the phone call that was too brief.

Really, post-phone call the only thing that I feel truly certain of and what I truly feel like I know when my life has just been thrown such a massive curve-ball is the fact that I am going to the jail I'd been given the name of and that I am going to see Zane. I can't get annoyed, I can't get angry, I can't excuse him and I can't think about how this is going to affect me from here on before I talk to him. Who knows, he might even be released by this evening.

I carelessly drop the wireless phone onto the cold marble bench and snatch up my keys, purse and phone. Within seconds of picking up my phone, before I even have a chance to leave the room, I feel a vibration that I know I can narrow it down to initiating from one of the objects in my hand. Looking at my phone, I am surprised that I still haven't reached my threshold and that I am still continuing to be surprised by things today. Although it doesn't quite measure up to discovering that my husband has been arrested today, seeing the 14 calls and 8 text messages that I have somehow managed to miss for the last few hours still brought a little element of surprise.

I pause from my initial plans to rush out the door and I stand on the spot to call the initiator of the 22 failed attempts to get in contact with me, as the receiver picks her phone up almost instantly.

"Do you know?"

"Do I know what? Do I know that the sky is blue, or do I know that my husband was arrested today? Yeah I know both of those things, actually."

There is a sigh from the side of the line.

"I am so sorry Rikki. He just went berzerk... He was completely out of control. I've never seen him act like that before."

"Wait, what? You were there? What the hell happened, Bella? It's a misunderstanding, isn't it?! He was baited, wasn't he? Daniel initiated it, right?"

There is a helpless plea in my tone and in my voice, a desperation that as much as I wanted to its a desperation that I couldn't conceal... A desperation that I have no doubt that my friend would be able to sense and a hope that I am clinging to, along with my hope that my friend will be able to help me with.

"No Rikki... I'm so sorry. For your sake, I really wish it was the other way around, but Zane lost it at Daniel. He saw us talking, we were waiting there for Lewis to discuss what might be wrong with Allie and what to do about it. I think that Zane must have assumed that I was seeing Dan behind Will's back and he just exploded. It was like he was possessed - he wouldn't even listen to reason. He did a fair bit of damage... He knocked Dan out and put him in hospital."

"Will he be okay?"

I don't especially care for Daniel's health and wellbeing, but I care for the fact that he is in that condition because of my husband.

That's not to mention that I know an assault charge will be a hell of a lot easier than dealing with a murder or manslaughter case.

"Yeah, he should be. He's woken up and the last I heard is that he's just dealing with a pretty bad concussion, broken nose, 2 broken ribs and a few fractures.

Zane is responsible for all that?

I don't quite know what in-genuine condolence I came up with to reply to Bella about the state and condition of her hospitalised ex-boyfriend. However, what I do know is that after interrupting a brief silence in our conversation, my friend's voice sounds small as she almost whispers my name, stabbing through the silence to deliver another blow to my wreck of a day.

"Rikki? He's pressing charges... I think there was a chance that he might have had to do a few conditional weeks in prison, cop one hell of a fine or some community service, but Daniel wants to press further charges... For when he assaulted him in the past, when I was still with him. I'm so sorry Rikki but the police said that with his record, it's almost definite that he's going to have to do time in jail."

"Bye Bella, I gotta go" I explain quickly, emotionless and precisely, all within one breath.

I hang up from the phone call with my friend purely because I know that I can't take listening to her, or anyone, or anything else any more. It is too much. It's _all_ way too much and way too soon.

I need to get out and I need to get the answers, the explanation from my husband that I am burning within to hear.

"Tam! I'm going out. Zane's been arrested" I bellow out to the teenager upstairs, letting her know what the current situation is.

Most times, calling out to Tam, or anyone else for that matter (even if you tell them it is urgent) would result in having to wait for a long, long time before getting a reply, let alone their presence. However, today, after shouting my announcement out, my sister flew downstairs to meet me where I am hovering by the front door and preparing to leave.

"What?! What happened? What did he do? I'll come with you..."

"I don't know the full story, but I just know that it's been a misunderstanding. I'm going out to sort this out and get the full story. I don't want you to come though. I need to do this alone" I explain to Tam as she wraps me in a brief hug, before allowing me to leave.

Walking out the door, I consider my parting words to Tam which float around and echo within my own mind.

I desperately want to hope and think that I don't know Zane as well as I do... I _will_ to believe that it was out of character for my husband and that there is no chance for him to be the sort of person to get himself into the situation he is in, that it is all a mistake,

that he will be proved innocent and we'll move on with life... But I _do_ know him better than that and despite my little faith and trust in him right now, I know the odds are stacking up against him and his track record.

The problem is that I don't think I'm ready to hear that it's _not_ all just one big misunderstanding...

* * *

><p>The hour and a half drive to the isolated and remote Palen Creek Correctional Centre seems far longer than an hour and a half.<p>

Receiving the phone call and leaving the Gold Coast had been an instantaneous and spontaneous decision for me. I got the directions that I would need to find my way there and I didn't do anything else. The second that I knew where I was going, I didn't think, I didn't consider visiting hours or any other finer details and I didn't prepare. I truly just _did_, _leaving to find where my husband is being kept.

Unfortunately for me, I had missed the visiting hours of the Correctional Centre which is simply just fancy-pants terminology for 'jail' or 'prison'.

So, instead of driving another hour and a half home again, knowing it was a drive that I was in no state to make, I just stayed. In my car. Overnight.

I'd had no food, no blankets, no fresh clothing and not a good nights sleep. So, by the time that visiting hours finally arrive and by the time that I finally enter through the gates of the Palen Creek Correctional Centre for the very first time in my life, I am only in the mood for things to get easier and to get better. _Not_ harder and certainly _not_ worse...

After one very intimate search of my body and my belongings later, I am finally let into the visitor area of the jail, increasingly closer and closer to reaching the reason I am there.

As I sit and wait amongst the floods of green outfits, I realise that I have never felt so out of place in a long time which is a big thing for me to feel and take notice of. I'm not like Cleo or Emma or Bella... I'm not conservative and aware of whether I am welcome or accepted in a place. I make my spot and live with it, not caring in the least about whether or not that is out of place compared to everyone else. Today and here in the Correctional Centre is a very different story though.

Eventually, something else than the fact that I look out of place catches my eye. Dressed in the unflattering green outfit everyone else is wearing, looking like he hasn't slept for any longer than an hour in the last thirty-six hours, my husband, a little source of familiarity comes sulking out. It is as equally as unusual for him to look as unconfident as he does right now as it was for me to feel as uncomfortable in a situation as I do right now.

Seeing him, I don't know what to say or what to do. I don't know whether I should or whether I want to yell at him or whether I want

to just hug him and hold him. In the end, I opt for humour; my usual defense mechanism.

"Well you know that you took the whole sleeping in the dog house thing to a whole other level, Zane..."

Just in case I can't get any more shocked, Zane furthers my disbelief, sending spiraling to a whole new level. For a few moments I am rendered speechless until Zane stands up and begins to walk off back the way that he had come from.

"I want you to go. I'm pleading guilty. I don't know how long the sentence will be, but I do know that I don't want to see you and I don't want to talk to you again until everything is back to normal and until I'm out of here. Please leave, Rikki."

Ignoring my light-hearted attempt at a joke, Zane seems cold. He seems cold and empty and hollow. He's almost robot-like as he looks beyond me in the confines of the prison. He doesn't even display a drop of emotion or feeling.

"Wait! What?! What are you talking about?! I'm starving, I'm cold and I feel dirty because I slept in the car all freaking night because the minute I heard, I raced here to be with you and I stayed here until the minute I could visit you. Don't get me wrong, I'm angry as hell with you, I'm worried sick about what's going to happen next and I hate you for hurting someone else, but that doesn't just stop the fact that I love you! I can't not be here for you Zane and I can't not do absolutely anything I can to support you."

Zane stops walking off, appearing to consider and listen to what I am telling him out of desperation. By the time that he starts walking back over to me, I have high hopes and I think it may be all good. I think I've broken through his cover that he wants me to leave him to suffer alone while he is in prison.

... Or maybe I haven't...

"I can't see you anymore while I'm in here. Don't come back. I'll just refuse to see you if you do."

I feel like I can identify 10, maybe 20 different feelings and emotions as I stand there, alone and abandoned, in the middle of the Palen Creek Correctional Centre while my husband walks off in the opposite direction after announcing that he is cutting off contact with me.

I feel numb.

I feel cheated.

I feel enraged.

I feel betrayed.

I feel shocked.

I feel angry.

I feel disregarded.

I feel sad.

I feel lonely.

I feel mad.

I feel hurt.

I feel abandoned.

However, although I express myself angrily, in typical fashion for me and despite every single other feeling that I am subject to at this current moment, there is one particular emotion, the hardest and most prevalent, that stands out from every single other thing that I feel.

... Heartbreak.

I am left to feel absolutely and completely heartbroken. My heart pounds, my chest feels like it is constricting my raspy breathe with burning tears that pound on the tear-ducts in the corner of my eyes, pleading to be let out and escape.

Walking off, failing to consider me, how I am feeling and what _I_ need to pull through this situation that he has put us in, Zane has reverted to his weaknesses.

He is the same Zane Bennett I had met eight or so years ago. He is the same selfish, stubborn and wickedly proud guy that I had fallen in love with through his rebellious, bad boy charm.

I see it all now. I see that he is the same rebel without a cause as he leaves me with a broken heart and a marriage I don't know the fate of...

* * *

><p>Eek, that was probably my last update as an 18 year old! So what did you all think of that? I knew that this would all be a storyline from very early on in the planning process, but the cutting Rikki out thing only came to me later. I just felt like that is far more in character for Zane (and his pride that just about is a person of its own) when I literally couldn't plan or think about writing jail visits. I hope you see it that way too.

**Sorry Zikki fans. I do like their coupling, but at the end of the day Zane can be completely stubborn and selfish. The big question is, what does Zane's decision mean for their relationship and marriage?
**

208 reviews please and the new chapter will be up before you all know it!

Next chapter: Cleo and Bella rally together to support Rikki. But when Cleo and Bella both have confessions of their own to make, who is it that throws a friendship-threatening spanner in the works?

17. Handle With Care

****Thank you all for reading and spending the time to review the last chapter! I hope you enjoy the following chapter.****

* * *

><p>Chapter ****Seventeen****** â€" ****Handle With Care**

_Cleo's__ POV_

It's getting late. Lewis had been vague before he left. All he'd mentioned was something about getting an urgent text, something about Allie and even more obscurely, something about Daniel.

Not long after reading that and telling me, Lewis was out the door and my husband hasn't been home since.

Kim is in her bedroom, directly next to ours 'studying' while my step-mother is downstairs, so it isn't like I am feeling lonely without Lewis home. The problem is that I just have this bad feeling, a worrying sensation in the pit of my gut that is telling me that something isn't right. I have nothing to base my suspicions off of, but I just can't shake this feeling.

I have been trying to distract myself, continuing to read my '_What to Expect When You're Expecting' _guidebook before the rattle of my bedroom's door-handle before it proceeds to open, catching my attention mid-paragraph.

Lewis walks in and I immediately notice that he does not look goodâ€| It's not that he looks sick or unhealthy or anything like that, but rather, he just looks drained. _Really_ drained and really washed out.

"Hey. Are you alright? Where were you?"

Lewis lets out a sigh of agony that is weighing on him in every aspect other than physically as he walks over to our bed. I am already sprawled out over our double bed, which had been a gradual take over of territory while I had been reading, before I shuffle over and give Lewis a little space to collapse with exhaustion onto the space beside me, before he begins explaining the earlier events to me.

"I went to the boulevardâ€| Allie's sick so I was supposed to be meeting up with Bella and Daniel; trying to work out what we could do â€" that in itself is another long story -, but in the end, Zane got arrested."

"What?!" I bolt upright in bed instantly out of shock. "You're joking! Oh gosh, what for this time?! Does Rikki know?"

Lewis shrugs, getting comfortable on our bed, lying on his stomach and resting his head on both arms.

"I'd assume that she would have to find out. The authorities will probably let her know. Zane put Dan in hospitalâ€| bashed him to a

pulp. I've only just left the police station, making statements with Bella, even though I didn't really have much all that much to state. That's why I was home so late, sorry."

"Oh don't be stupidâ€¦ You don't have to be sorry. _I'm_ sorry to hear that that's how your night has ended up."

Lewis lets out another sigh of frustration as he buries his head into the quilt within his arms. I gently and soothingly rub his hair until he looks up once again, speaking up.

"Hey how are you feeling by the way? Bit better than earlier?"

I nod feebly, trying to come up with a tactful way to avoid telling him what I don't want to share with him, but in a way that still allows me to answer the question he has posed to me.

Physically I am feeling so much better, less tired and less nauseous, but there is a different kind of unwell that I don't especially want to confess to my husband.

"Yeah, you could say thatâ€¦"

Fortunately, I am saved by the bell so to speak when my phone receives a message, interrupting and putting a natural pause on the conversation I have been engaged in and having with my husband.

"It's Bella" I inform him the second that I check my phone, before I even have a chance to read the content of the message that my friend had sent to me.

'_Hey. I'm assuming Lewis informed you about tonight's happeningsâ€¦ We're really going to need to be there for Rikki to support her through this. Maybe meet up tomorrow for chats at Mako? xo' _

I sent her a confirmation in return, setting our plans in stone and in motion after she sends another message back to only minutes later to finalize our plans and inform me of Rikki's availability.

'_She said she'll ****try**** to make it. We'll make sure we get her there, dead or alive. See you tomorrow_!'

* * *

><p>The following day and as per our arrangements, Rikki, Bella and I all meet up in the moon pool at Mako Island.<p>

I arrive there first, before Bella does not too much later than me. This gives us a chance to discuss the situation, how we think Rikki will be coping and whether we should tip-toe around her or not. It also gives Bella time to talk to me about what else had happened the day before, filling me in with the details that Lewis had missed informing me of, after only reaching the others mid-arrest and after the crime had already been committed.

Not that I take notice since I am deep in conversation with the bubbly blond; as I have been since she had arrived, but by the time that Rikki arrives and joins us as she surfaces in the moon pool - way later than the time that our plans were made for.

Knowing Rikki, there is probably a chance that she has been hesitant about coming out today, thinking she will be wasting our time. In fact, I wouldn't put it past her that she probably swam almost the entire way to Mako, before turning around and heading back and forth between the mainland and the island several times before entering.

Unfortunately, Bella and I are still engrossed in our conversation and neither Bella nor I notice the shimmer of gold and white-blond hair, nor do we hear the soft bubbling as our friend surfaces quietly.

"Sorry I'm late" Rikki eventually speaks up. I am ashamed that it takes her having to speak to alert us to the fact that she has arrived.

Even if my theory is untrue that Rikki feels like she is wasting our time unnecessarily today or if her suspicions are entirely not how Bella and I feel, when she swam in to the moon pool it is probably sounding like she is the last thing on our mind amid our in-depth conversation about offspring, which would just confirm what I guess she is possibly suspecting.

"Don't be. I'm sorry we didn't see you swim in. How are you? I am so sorry to hear about Zane" I instantly apologize, while Bella and I greet our friend.

I glide a little further along in the water, swimming into what is probably my close friend's personal space bubble, but I do this for good reason. I try to give Rikki a hug and comfort my friend who I can only assume is upset and although unlikely for her, possibly emotional. However as I open my arms, preparing to hug her, in the same moment Rikki paints on a smile that tries to tell me that she is fine and that she doesn't need my support.

"Don't let me interrupt you. Keep talking, finish your conversation. I don't know much about kids, but I can try to add a word or two every now and then."

I look over to Bella warily and can tell that she is on the same page as I am. Neither of us know what to do. Perhaps she wants a distraction, but it feels inconsiderate to be talking about something so minor as babies and pregnancies in front of her. At the same time though, we don't want to say so, wanting her to feel comfortable and trying not to push her today of all days.

"Well how's your pregnancy going, Cleo? Sick of it yet? Do you know when you're due?" Bella eventually asks, hesitantly speaking up and obeying Rikki's wishes.

"Just about! I've already had to learn that 'morning sickness' is just code for 'all-day sickness'."

Bella cringes, before warning me as a seasoned expert that the early pregnancy symptoms and all-day sickness is just a sign of further horrors that are to come.

"You think the sickness is bad? Wait till you get to third trimester. Don't get too used to having any self-esteem, at all... And that's

coming from me! Not to mention if you carry the way I did, you become a whale as opposed to a mermaid. It doesn't do your ego many favours. But none of that compares to the worst few hours of your life before you commit to never sleeping for the next twelve months... It's not all bad, but the 97% of hell does outweigh the 3% of good just a little."

"Gee guys, try not to oversell the idea of reproducing..."

Bella rolls her eyes with amusement, going along with Rikki's sarcasm.

"Don't you get the picture? The moral of the story is basically, 'don't get pregnant' Rikki."

"Whoops. That one's a little bit too late... That advice should have come a little bit earlier."

This is a moment in the conversation that throws me off, and after looking over to my other friend with a quick glance, I can tell that it has thrown Bella too.

"You're pregnant?" I ask with a hesitance that is partly induced by not being able to tell if my friend is having me on and partly from my difficulty and inability to imagine either Rikki or Zane with a child of their own, or with any child that is with them for longer than an hour at a time.

"No. No, I'm not. I just thought I'd run with it. I needed a little pick me up."

If I did not know any better, I don't think that I would have been able to know or realise half of what Rikki is enduring and the fact that Zane had been arrested just one day ago based on her attitude. She is just so blasÃ©.

"That's so mean! It would be cool being pregnant at the same time" I reply in dispute of the trick that Rikki had just played on us.

"Oh dear... I knew you would say that. You were about to get out the matching maternity clothes and 'team pregnancy' group chant, weren't you? I dodged a bullet there!"

I sigh. I wish my attitude is like it had been earlier and like I thought it would remain, my attitude Rikki is referring to. I really, really do. That is part of the reason that I was been so down and out with Lewis earlier, I'd been trying to avoid addressing my attitude.

"I know that it's not all sunshine and happiness, you know..."

My statement that I had only really been intending to make as a passing comment is caught by Bella as she proceeds to run with it.

"What do you mean by that, Cleo? Having second thoughts?"

It would be easier, much easier to avoid her question altogether and just explain that my statement had come out wrong, that I am just feeling a bit off. Instead, I don't take that option. My choice is

partly down to reasons that even I don't know. I figure that I just really need to vent and get it out in the open somewhere, to someone.

"I guess... A little bit. It's not like it's anything major and it's not like I'll take any drastic action to do anything about it, I'm just having a few little regrets, you know? That's normal... isn't it? It's a big change and it wasn't even really a part of our plan just yet. I didn't want to say anything to Lewis about it though. I don't want him to feel guilt or regret since I feel stupid for even feeling like this!"

"Oh Cleo... That's completely normal. Having a baby is a massive change for anyone, but in my biased opinion I think that it is even harder for women. Not only are our lives going through these massive changes, but so are we and our bodies. It can get tough, but it's never not worth it, don't worry."

I smile at my friend, knowing that not only does she have the words to comfort me, but that she also has the experience behind those words.

"And if you end up hating Lewis more than you hate yourself for a while there, that is perfectly normal too. I'd hate to think of all the terrible things I cursed upon Will and his ability to reproduce during my pregnancy and before Allie was born. Basically, pregnancy is nine months of getting off Scot-free for being psychotic. It's all normal!"

Unknowingly, Bella and I begin to dominate our group conversation. I am completely absorbed by the conversation as she gives me a blunt and experienced guide to the changes I am experiencing, considering they are the same changes that she had been through four and a bit years ago. When I'm not fully engaged in talking or listening to her, I am laughing or freaking out about what she is saying.

Slowly, and after a while though, the conversation and the topic dies down to a lull in the dormant volcano we are hanging out in.

The silence isn't awkward and it isn't uncomfortable by any stretch of the imagination. Bella looks a little tired, I feel a little sicker again and Rikki seems a little subdued. It is nothing hugely abnormal and I don't realize that everything other than the tip of the iceberg is being hidden for one of my friends until she softly speaks up in a low whisper.

"He doesn't want to see me... He won't let me be there for him."

I can count on one hand how many times I have seen Rikki cry across the duration of our friendship and over all the years I have known her.

However, right now is one more occasion to add to the small tally.

She is the person who is the strongest through anything. She is the person who would fight through the hard times and carry everyone else through them with her.

For Rikki to crack and for Rikki to cry and break down, I know that

that means that Bella, myself and anyone else have very little idea of just how broken she is behind her facade and on the inside.

Bella and I comfort our friend, hold her and let her get her pent-up devastation into the open. Almost as soon as she has gained composure and control of herself again, she looks ashamed...

â€| Ashamed that she had cried and ashamed that she had lost so much of her fire and control, that she got to the point that she had to let people in.

"He doesn't deserve thisâ€|" Rikki eventually whispers. I can tell that she is still fighting hard not to let her emotions and her situation overwhelm her.

I sympathise for Rikki, verbally comforting her, but out of the corner of my eye, I can see the disagreement, the bite of her canine-tooth on the bottom corner of my other friend's lip.

Normally, my bubbly friend wouldn't have a problem with speaking her mind, to Rikki and me in particular, but today I can tell that her self-control is making a rare appearance and that her lips are sealed.

Unfortunately for Bella and Rikki too, Rikki notices our mutual friend's look too. However, she is less blasÃ©. She is just like a dog going after a bone when she wants to be.

"Bella, what is that look about?"

"What look? It's nothing, Rikki."

Bella tries to deny the claim, but her denial and her lie is hidden just about as well as she could hide her facial expression of initial disagreement.

"No. No it's not, Bella. Just tell me."

Bella sighs and I can identify the rock and the hard place that she is lodged between. She knows that she will experience and encounter a major difficulty either way. If she tells Rikki, she won't be happy about whatever or however Bella has disagreed with her. Alternatively, if Bella doesn't and if she refuses to tell her, she will not let up until she finds out what she wants to know. The end result will be the same, but it is just a matter of how easily Bella will give in and tell her.

"I didn't want to say anything to you. Especially not today, but I don't agree with what you just said. At all. I know how hard it is seeing someone that you love acting so harshly or out of character from the person that you know them to be. I know that is hard, Rikki, I do, but I also see the just side of it all. Zane does deserve this. He wasn't imprisoned for doing nothing."

"What do you mean?! Zane's not normally a violent person! It's not like he's a wife beater!"

Rikki is adamant. Bella is stuck in her thoughts from her personal experiences with a violent partner. I can see both of my friend's

perspective as their stubborn opinions once again clash.

"Guess what? Neither was Dan. The guy I feel in love with wouldn't hurt a fly. People change, Rikki! As hard as it is, it's better for Zane to pay for what he's done. I know what happens when violence goes without being dealt withâ€¦ That is something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, let alone you. It's better for Zane to be in jail, briefly, for a while if it saves you from ending up bruised and battered, crying on the bathroom floor as you try to decide whether the emotional or physical pain hurts more."

Opinions are becoming less calculated and are becoming increasingly personal, just as the hurtful words that are being thrown around with them are. I know that I have to intervene and break the argument that pulls on and affects both girls' heartstrings personally creating an argument of blurred lines.

As always, I am going to have to play the mediator, the Devil's advocate to two of my closest friends.

"Come on guys. It's been a long couple of days. You've both been through a lot with this situation. Let's give the conversation a rest. If you need to, you can bring it up again at another time when you're both in a better headspace, hey?"

Bella agrees with what I said, trying to call a ceasefire, but Rikki isn't so easily persuaded. I don't expect her to be.

"No wayâ€¦ Zane is a good guy. He would never hurt me."

"Yeah, a 'good guy' who put my ex in hospital, and for no reason?! You weren't thereâ€¦ He lost it Rikki! He went ape! Lewis and I were meeting up with him. Daniel has been trying to help Will and I with Allie! He risked his job helping us. Zane needs to get his tendency to violence sorted out before he doesn't stop there!"

Rikki's temper is flaring up, I can tell, and it doesn't take a genius to note that the mood is heating up and intensifying between the girls once again.

"What? So you're saying that Zane would hit me? That he'd abuse me? Maybe I can pick my men better than you can, Bella!"

"Well guess what? I told the police that if it needs to be taken to court, I'll be happy to be a witness in the case. I will testify against him if they need to take the case to court if he pleads not guilty. I can't lie to the courts and I can't see you go through the same pain that I did, Rikki. I know that you can only see the one perspective, but it's for your own good. It's going to be hard either way."

Rikki just scoffs, giving us and Bella in particular, an award-winning eye-roll filled with disgust, before submerging and swimming right on out of the moon pool, away from us and away from reality.

"I'm really worried about herâ€¦" Bella confesses, her statement sounding a hundred times louder than the low whisper truly is, from the echo her words create as the noise bounces off the rock walls of the silent cave.

"So am I, Bella" | "So am I" | "

It is the truth. I've never seen Rikki so upset, so fragile and so vulnerable. She isn't the Rikki I know and this is just the beginning of it.

She is probably the strongest person I know, but now it seems that the next six months until Zane will be freed would not only make or break their relationship, but it is also going to be the making or breaking of Rikki at the same time" |

* * *

><p>So what are everyone's thoughts on that? Poor Rikki, hey? And are you more team Rikki or team Bella in the argument the girls raised?

223 reviews for the next chapter please!

**Next chapter: One character finds himself struggling before an old character is brought back. Who is it and what bombshell do they set off?*

18. Too Much To Handle

Well, I begin this authors note on a very solemn and sad note this time. What a sad time it's been for Australia. I don't know if any O/S readers have heard about the Sydney siege that resulted in a mother-of-three and cafe manager's death after a gunman held up 18 people in a cafe. I know Australian's most certainly have. The way the country has responded to the tragedies in the respect paid to the victims and the 'I'll ride with you' campaign **has been amazing since last Monday. That, and also the more recent and completely tragic killing of 8 kids aged between eighteen months old and fifteen years old. What a horrendous world we live in.**

**As for the last chapter -thank you to you who reviewed- but goodness gracious, talk about controversial. Some people (like me) could really see both sides to the story while others quite strongly took to either Rikki's or Bella's. In fact, I'm not completely sure that some people realised that both Rikki and Bella's opinions were supposed to be flawed and from one extreme to the other. Neither opinion was intended to be absolutely right or completely wrong it was all just issues and ethics in tough situations. **

* * *

><p>Chapter **Eighteen**** " ****Too Much To Handle**

_Lewis's__ POV_

~Four Months Later~

The last three months have flown by way too fast. Yet, at the same time, it has almost felt like we have been stuck in a standstill.

Zane's court case has been and gone. There were no surprises, no shock revelations and no unexpected results. He is serving his six months imprisonment and then another eighteen months of community service after that. Bella had testified, not with Rikki's blessing but the girls hadn't allowed the legal fiasco to ruin their friendship, the way that it looked set to for a while there.

Daniel hadn't gotten off Scot-free either. He'd lost his volunteering gig with the hospital, been required to attend correctional counselling and has community service hours to complete also.

The court case that myself, my wife and our other mutual friends all attended had also marked the first time that Zane had allowed his wife to see him, since the time that she turned up to the jail which she had told us about. Since the court case had passed around three and a half months earlier, as far as I know, Zane still hasn't let Rikki see him since then either.

Rikki hasn't been good since then. She's fought hard against the turmoil that is tainting her personal life, but I'm not the only one who can see that the tribulations have been eating away at her entire life. She does good at not dwelling on it and keeping a cover, but I can tell. I can see through her facade. Most of us can. She isn't as fine as she makes out to be, but then again, no one is expecting that of her in her situation.

Will, in exchange for the way that his best friend had treated Rikki, something we all disapprove of, had cut Zane off months ago. Initially, Zane had tried using his friend as an avenue of communication to find out what had been happening in the life that he had been isolated from as equally as he had been cut off from it with his imprisonment. However, it didn't take long for Will to sever those ties, out of principle and out of respect for Zane's own wife that he had cut out first.

Bella and Will, who had just months ago resumed their relationship that they had ended years ago are still together and doing well as far as I know. However, the couple's young daughter Allie isn't doing as well as their relationship is thriving. The poor girl has been experiencing sickness and pain on and off spasmodically for months. Thankfully, it seems to be much better and less painful on the tyke than it had been when she first started showing symptoms of her sickness months ago. Fortunately too, her parents have been able to monitor Allie's sickness and keep it at bay, avoiding the last resort of a trip to the hospital which could do goodness knows what to her secret that she and the other girls share. Not to mention, the medicine that Daniel had smuggled out for Allie before his run-in with Zane has been helping too.

Finally, there's Cleo and I.

Cleo is doing well. So is her pregnancyâ€¦ That is as far as we can tell from our limited knowledge without the assistance of doctors, appointments and ultrasounds. She's started showing recently and now there is now a swollen and visible bulge that is expanding the size of her slim frame and abdomen.

There hasn't been much action or movement from the baby yet, but we aren't too worried. There is every chance that the kid could be four months along which was perfectly normal, or it could be two months

off entering the world which would result in more cause for concern. Regardless, there is nothing safe that we can do about it.

Me?

Physically; I am fine. I was masses better than I had been even just two or three years ago after my GBS diagnosis.

Emotionally; I am healthy, I am happy, I am coping.

However, for almost the last three months, there's been this feeling in the pit of my stomach, the back of my mind, something deep within me that I haven't been able to shake.

I think I can put it down to being stressed, overworked.

Life has been intense, a little challenging and I've let myself take a little more onto my plate than I can probably handle realistically.

There is just always something big going on now â€¦ Always.

My long days of work can be hard enough on its own. While I am fifty times better than I had been after being hospitalised and well enough to be released from hospital to return home, my body still doesn't quite have the same threshold that it used to have before the Guillain-Barre reared its ugly head.

I'd been warned that I probably won't ever quite have the same stamina and energy levels or the same capabilities with my nervous system. While the disease itself has subsided long ago, it still left a scar, a mark of where it had been and the damage that it had done.

Long story, short, at times, work has been too much for me to handle and by the time I get home all I want to do is go to bed. The problem is that I'm not able to do this every day. Some days, by the time I get home, Rikki is already be there wanting to spend time with Cleo and I. These visits have been occurring on an increasing basis since Zane had been sent to jail. I truly feel sorry for Rikki, but hearing Cleo and Rikki's girl talk for hours on end is one of the last things that I need when I'm exhausted.

Sometimes I'd try to just pass the girls and bury myself away in Cleo and I's room, but Cleo would tell me off for my rudeness and expect me to be out there with her. I don't like admitting that sometimes I am just too tired to sit there and listen to the conversation.

The days that Rikki isn't over seems to be the days that Cleo and I are expected to fulfill our chores to help out and pull our weight around the house like all five members of the household are expected to. Nowadays, with Cleo's progressing pregnancy, I complete all the chores, all the cleaning and all the cooking that Cleo and I would have normally halved. It is my own choice, telling her to rest since she still works full time while she is goodness knows how far into her pregnancy. I don't mind doing this, but it is just another little additional burden.

Additionally, after offering to Bella and Will that I would look out

for and research into what is plaguing their daughter's health, I have also been swamped with my personal research and investigation into what is wrong with Allie. Nothing makes sense as to why the little girl would be perfectly healthy one day and then more sick than her parents have ever seen her on the odd day here and there.

So far, I have spent hours and hours of my own time researching every individual symptom, every sickness and every mermaid mythology regarding offspring and anything that could be even remotely connected to why Allie is sick. Yet, despite all of my time and research, everything is still completely inconclusive. I have no idea what might possibly be going on with the tot.

All in all; every duty has been adding up and taking a toll... The additional chores around the house, helping Bella and Will to find what is wrong with Allie, being a friend to Rikki, work and not to mention that I have additional responsibilities and extra work to do than most expectant fathers regarding their partner and unborn child. I am in charge of monitoring Cleo's pregnancy the best I can as an amateur, checking her levels such as iron and blood sugar and the baby.

Recently, there's been an overwhelming tightness to my chest. Even when I am relaxing, I can't feel relaxed as I struggle to find the off button. Normally, I always love having a task or a personal project on the go. However, just one of the three or four things that I am involved in would suffice. Not all of them.

To say the least, I am feeling snowed in. It is a simple, but overwhelming case of too much to do and in not enough time.

* * *

><p>It is getting late on a weeknight.<p>

Cleo is sprawled out across our bed, holding her phone, probably texting someone or checking up on one of her many social media accounts.

I am set up and settled at the desk in our room and I will probably be perfectly content to stay there for as long as I can. I am on a roll, feeling like I am getting somewhere with the write ups and reports that I need to do for work. Additionally, I am trawling through and searching a new 'mythological principles' website that I had somehow missed throughout all of my other searches on the topic when I lost motivation for my work.

The newly discovered website and forum reminds me of the same information that I had found on ambergris all those years ago. I hope that means that I am on somewhat of the right track and I hope optimistically for a similar success rate of information (without the obvious side-effects of learning first hand of ambergris' capabilities) as I had experienced in that situation.

"Lewis!"

"Mmmm"

Replying to Cleo, I do not even bother to look up from my current fixation on the computer after my wife calls my name.

"Come here! Quick! It's the baby."

As soon as she said the 'B word' I am up and out of my seat, by her side like the speed of the Looney Tunes Road Runner.

"What is it? Are you alright?!" I ask the question, but as soon as I see the illuminated smile on my wife's face, it answers my own question for me.

Cleo does not hesitate in snatching my hand up, pressing it to her burgeoning baby belly.

"I can feel the baby kicking... That's the first time."

The room goes silent as we both sit there, waiting in an anticipated silence; hoping our lack of distraction and our concentration would cue our son or daughter's movements again.

However, instead of feeling a second kick instantaneously, we wait. And wait. And wait.

I am just about to give up any hope of feeling anything at all for now and retract my hand from Cleo's stomach when a small, barely noticeable sensation of movement, brushes against my hand.

"Did you feel it?! That was it!" Cleo checks with me excitedly.

It is only little, it is barely noticeable, but it is completely awesome.

Feeling that movement, that energy within my wife's stomach, it just makes it all real for me.

It is one thing to talk about the baby and plan for the baby, but especially in Cleo and I's situation when we haven't even seen the little one with the help of a TV screen and ultrasound yet, it does become a little hard to distinguish the theory of a baby from the fact that there will be one entering our lives very soon.

"That's so cool, Cleo... That's our kid! It's really in there!"

"Sure is" Cleo nods to me proudly, her entire face; her eyes, her cheeks and her lips erupting into a beaming smile with an ounce of humour. "That's just a bit of confirmation for you in case you were starting to think I was leading you on!"

* * *

><p>As much as I would have loved to have spent every day until the day it arrives on kicking watch, sitting there, anticipating and waiting for another kick, unfortunately that just isn't the way that life goes.<p>

Today, as a last resort and a last attempt to help me resolve the mystery behind Allie's illness, I had arranged to meet up with Max. He has always helped me in one way or another, cryptically or

directly, in the past and he is my last chance that I have to help my friends and their daughter.

"Lewis, my boy! It's good to see you."

Max Hamilton looks older, frailer than he had the last time I saw him. His hair has grown lighter, but that accounts for the loss of illumination and light in his eyes.

It is sad seeing a man who had looked so strong, so dignified once before losing his vigour and vim that he had once possessed with every passing day. I think that I notice this especially since there would have been almost 3,330 days in between the time I had seen the man last.

However, despite his undeniable aging, I don't doubt the smile on his face as he sees me approach his little retreat.

"Max... Long time, no see. How've you been? You're looking well!"

"Yeah, not bad for an old codger like me, hey?"

I laugh lightly at the older man's light-hearted representation of himself. "So how has life been treating you?"

"The fish were biting today, say no more."

The simple comment reaffirms my gratitude for having Cleo, my family in my life. All he has is his little old shack, his knowledge and memories of mermaid magic and fishing.

That could've been me in 50 years time.

I see a lot of myself in Max, especially when he describes his life of fifty odd years ago. We'd been the same friend to a trio of girls, their anchor as they struggled and enjoyed their incredible secret. Max and I had both been the supportive friend, the one who would do whatever we can do for them.

After the girl's sacrificed the mermaid side of their life, Max had let go of Gracie. That was a move that I am fairly sure that he has lived to regret...

I'd been in a similar situation and at a similar crossroads after Cleo and I drifted apart and ended our relationship when we were 16, but I got her back. Now, we'd have each other, our kids and our grandkids in one another's lives for the rest of our life.

"And you?" Max adds to his response of how his day had been, giving me the question that I had asked him back over to me, for me to answer. "I hope you're still with Cleo!"

I laugh at his remark that could have been re-worded in about 100 other ways which would have made it more tactful. I know Max, though. He is as blunt as can be and he isn't one to beat around the bush to take caution with his wording. Not to mention, he's always had a soft spot for Cleo who reminded him of his Gracie.

"My life's going well, thanks. And yes, yes... I'm certainly still

with Cleo. We've been married for a bit over four years and now we're expecting our first child."

The joy on the older man's face slowly seemed to evaporate after an initially positive reaction.

"You'd better hope that kid takes after you then!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Mermaid offspring. Powerful. Very, very powerful..."

I scrunch my face up at his reaction which I fear will have a negative result on the reason I am there.

"That was part of the reason I wanted to come here and have a chat to you. Cleo and I have friend's whose daughter seems to be really ill on and off recently. Bella, the girl's mother, is a mermaid who transformed in a moon pool like Mako's, but over in Ireland."

"How old is the girl?"

"Which one? Bella is Cleo's age, but her daughter is four."

"Oh dear... That would be about right. Listen Lewis, I think you'd better sit down..."

Max leads us over to a lounge suite that appears to be about a hundred years old, but I don't care. Instead, I am starting to grow very concerned, as the older man looks paler and fainter than he had since I'd arrived.

"Lewis, you know Charlotte and the power she displayed... Super mermaid, if you'd like..."

I nod as he continues.

"The thing is, with every generation, the power of a mermaid is said to become more and more concentrated. I've read theories about this since the 90's. To be quite honest, I never believed this until Charlotte expressed the same strength as all three of the other girls. She only carried the dormant genetics of a mermaid from Gracie, which were activated after she found the moon pool. That's because Gracie's powers were dormant when she gave them up. It's different and surpassingly stronger for the offspring of active mermaids. Anyway, the powers begin to express themselves at an age where a child is old enough to have a slight control or understanding over their body. That would be right with her age then...Fortunately, the generation after a mermaid, while strong, is controllable. With every generation after that, it grows in strength, but sacrifices control."

"So what power would Allie possess then?"

Max let out a sigh, before explaining exactly what he figured Allie's powers were from what he has read.

Half an hour later, I left Max's to return home, feeling completely shell-shocked at my discovery.

* * *

><p>After meeting up with Max, listening to his theories and his knowledge of everything and anything mermaid, I try to digest what is potentially 'wrong' with Allie, what has been plaguing her health recently and more importantly why.

It seems like it should be a positive that she isn't sick, that she is going to be alright, but I can't say that the issue isn't anything serious. I don't know which is worse, actually... Whether it would have been worse for her to have some virus she'd recover from, or this expansion to her mermaid-ness.

Before I get too worked up thinking about the potential, I decide to go to straight to the source and her parent's, to confirm that I haven't missed something with the hope that I will uncover some detail to disprove Max's theory altogether.

"Hey Bella, I've just been talking to an old friend who's knows all the ins and outs of mermaid mythology to nut out what's up with Allie. Can I just make sure I got a few details straight?"

I ask a series of questions, hoping there'd be the opposite answer to each one that I receive, while I silently try not to let on until it is almost a 99% guarantee from all the information I have collaborated.

"Bella... Allie isn't sick. Her powers are coming to fruition. I'm not quite sure if you and Will are quite ready for this..."

I am in disbelief. _Me_. Allie isn't even my kid!

I have no way of predicting how the poor parents who are about to have their lives turned upside down by the answer we have spent months trying to find will react, let alone cope with what is only going to get worse and get harder.

The extent of Allie's powers is mind-blowing. I thought that Charlotte's powers had been strong, but I am once again proven wrong.

As always with anything to do with the mystery behind the magic of mermaids, it is two steps forward and three _very_ big steps back...

* * *

><p>That's all for this time! What did you think of that? Please leave your opinions and thoughts for me to peruse over. Any ideas of what Allie's powers may involve?

****At least 241 reviews for the next chapter!****

****Next chapter: More about Allie's powers are revealed as Will struggles with what the revelation means for him.****

19. Dangerous Waters

****Welcome to the first chapter of Far From Perfection 2 for 2015!**

**

I was really hoping that this would be up sooner but that just didn't happen. I've been super busy and barely home which is something that isn't about to change any time soon. Last month I was in Sydney and next month I'll be going overseas so wanted to squeeze a chapter in in case I don't have time until March!

* * *

><p>Chapter **Nineteen**** â€" ****Dangerous Waters**

_Will's__ PO__V_

After receiving a phone call, Bella left the room almost twenty minutes earlier.

However, when she returns to the room that myself and our friends are in, I instantly notice that something has changed in the time since she'd left.

She hasn't said a thing. In fact, she's barely even moved a muscle other than walking into the room again. I am already alarmed by the time I see it in her aqua eyes that indeed, something is very, very wrongâ€|

* * *

><p>~ Earlier in the Evening ~

Bella, Kyle, Allie, Rikki, Tam and I had been hanging out at Bella's apartment since she'd had us all over for dinner. I know that she had originally intended for it to be a whole group catch up thing, but Cleo and Lewis hadn't been able to make it because he was busy tonight and those two were like an attached-at-the-hip couple.

After dinner, it had been a topic of conversation as we decided what to do next, be it we play a game, watch a movie together or just talk.

"So what now guys?"

"How about _Apples to Apples_?" Bella's brother, Kyle suggests from the lounge where Rikki and he had been conversing closely.

"Yeah! Apples, apples!" my daughter shouts, giving her input and opinion in the matter. She doesn't have the slightest clue of how to play the game which is for and targeted towards an older demographic, but she just loves the box; piling the cards in and out and so forth while us adults play.

Eventually there is a vote, deciding by consensus that the more popular choice of _Compatibility_ is to be played instead.

Allie, the one person who is for the opposing and alternative board game is not as happy with this unanimous decision.

"But I WANT to play _Apples Apples_!" Allie demands as she misses a word in the title of the board game's name. I can sense that my

daughter is getting overtired, equalling her abnormally ratty behaviour. However, while I think one thing -that I am not going to cave and give in to let her get what she wants in this instance-, my body betrays me and leads me on a very different path.

"Will! She can't just get what she wants because she asks for it!" Bella hisses as she snatches the board game box away from me. Before I could stop and think what I am doing, I had already had time to grab and prepare to set it up on her dining table.

I scrunch my face up and scratch my head, partly out of confusion and partly out of protest. "What? I know that, Bella! I don't know what happened there... I swear that I didn't mean to let her."

My girlfriend rolls her eyes at me and I can't blame her. The game had been in my hands and on the way to Allie's to be played. I wouldn't have believed me.

I am having trouble even just reasoning with myself! I can't quite pinpoint what had happened or how the board game had ended up in my hands, let alone at what point I had decided to yield to my daughter's wishes and get the game for her. In my mind, I had absolutely no intention of giving it to her.

It is just really...odd.

Fortunately, Allie is distracted as Tam cowers out from the bathroom, instantly being pounced on by my outgoing four-year-old.

Blonde hair goes flying everywhere as she latches onto the legs of the poor teenager. Allie certainly is not one to be known as being backward in coming forwards. My kid has more confidence than I do!

"Aunty Tam! Play with me!"

Across the room, I warn my daughter in the lapse of what Bella has been trying to instil in her for as long as possible. "Manners, Allie!"

"Please! Please Aunty Tam. I want you to play with me" Allie enunciates the word that I had just moments ago pointed out to her that she had forgotten the first time around, so as to prove her manners to me. For a four year old, she has the grammar and English skills of a child many years older than her age. However, when I remember who her mother is, it really isn't that surprising.

"Fine" my fellow house-mate agrees, allowing herself to be led by Allie. It appears that the two are en-route to heading into the younger girl's room in the house that she currently shares with her mother and uncle for half of each week.

It is not uncommon for Allie to get an idea in her head and then proceed to become completely sidetracked from that initial idea. Clearly, that is the case again as she starts to drag Tam to her bedroom, before she stops right as the girls near the kitchen.

"I'm hungry. Can I have some biscuits, Aunty Tam?"

I overhear the conversation and step in as my daughter's parent and as half of her primary discipline.

"No, Allie. You didn't want to eat all of your dinner, so you know that you don't get treats for that."

"But I WANT a biscuit!" Allie says with a stomp of her foot that results in earning her a stern warning from me.

However, what goes unnoticed to me is the fact that Tam proceeds to fulfil Allie's request. The strange thing is that she had just located the biscuits almost instantly, which leaves me wondering how she knew where they are kept with a blink of the eye. I know that Bella hides them from her brother just as much as she tries to keep them from Allie. Even I know Bella's apartment almost as well as I know my own home, yet even I on occasions have struggled to find the biscuits when I would try sneaking a treat to Allie or for myself.

It is all very peculiar, it just doesn't add up or make sense, but little do I know that Allie's desires and her wants is just the very beginning of it...

At this stage, it is all just the calm before the storm hits...

* * *

><p>~Current~

"Bella what's wrong?" I ask in question of my girlfriend's odd behaviour and demeanour since she had entered the room once again.

"Allie's not sick, Willâ€|" Bella whispers in a low tone, before snatching my hand into her own and dragging me into her bedroom.

Maybe it is just me, but I really thought the fact that Allie is supposedly okay is good news, after our months of speculation and fears of potential illnesses that had matched up with her symptoms.

I notice the phone is still in Bella's hand and she obviously hasn't ended the call before she passes the device to me.

"I'm speechless... Speak to Lewis. He'll be able to explain it to you better."

I quickly snatch up the mobile, putting my ear to my girlfriend's phone, rapidly beginning to worry what news about our daughter would have the mother of my child so shell-shocked.

"Hey mate. Have you worked out what's wrong with Allie?"

"Yeah. I saw an old friend of mine. He's helped me out with a few other mermaid-related things in the past. Thought I'd visit him as a last resort attempt to work out what is wrong with Allie."

Out of Lewis's unnecessary rambles -he is clearly nervous- the only useful information that I get from my friend is that he had had the

help of someone else.

"Who else knows?! How and why the hell did you tell him?"

"Listen; there was an original trio of mermaids. I thought I'd told you and Bella about this in the past. Anyway, he was a bit like me - the confidant and protector of those girls."

Once again, more rambles and no result. I hate to imagine what the guy will be like in 60 years time when he really does start to lose his marbles.

"Lewis. Can you just cut to the chase, please? What is wrong with her?"

"Long story short? It's Allie's powers that have been slowly coming to fruition."

It is surprising since Bella and I had always figured that Allie since it is only genetically, she would only ever be a mermaid physically. Our theory had always previously been supported by the fact that she had never shown any signs of displaying Bella's or any of the other girls powers, so we just assumed that she never would.

"Wow, really? My girl is getting powers? Bella and I always assumed that she'd only be a mermaid genetically and not possess the other stuff like the other girls. Surely her mermaid side would be weaker since not only is Bella only half mermaid, but she's also be getting half her genes from me, so really Allie could only ever be a quarter mermaid."

"Sorry Will, I never let on, but I'd always suspected otherwise. I had a feeling that she would be stronger than any of the other girls somehow; the mermaid side is not one to let up easily. I just never said anything since I didn't want to worry you and Bella if there was no point in stressing about it in the past."

Although Bella and I had come to our own conclusions in the past, it had never been something that was set in stone, so while it does come as a bit of a shock, I don't really know what is so ground-breaking about the situation that seems to have Bella beyond shell-shocked.

"That's not all, Will. Based off of what my friend, Max has read and learnt in the past, all of which fit in with Allie's symptoms, then there's a really, really big chance that her power's are going to be powerful... Really, really powerful..."

"Powerful? What exactly do you mean by that? You're worrying me, Lewis..."

There is a concerning deep sigh over the other side of the line.

"The concise overview of her powers is that basically, Allie can control people."

Those words are so shocking to me, so mind-blowing that my mind can't even begin to explore the possibilities and the enormity of what my

friend had just revealed is in my daughter's control. I can't even begin to understand the prospect of what her powers mean, since the scale of such control is completely incomparable.

"Wha-What do you mean?... _How_? "

"You know how the girl's control liquids and the weather, right?"

Over the phone, I nod before realizing that there is no way my friend could have possibly identified my body language unless he's been practicing his telepathy. "Yeah. Go on..."

"Right. So more or less, Allie technically has the _same control_, but on a greater scale. It's just an extended version of what control and powers that the girls have... Like functionality of liquids, but to the extreme."

"What do you mean by that? She can just control or shift more water or weather? Or does she have like a hybrid combination of the powers or something?"

After Bella's gobsmacked reaction and Lewis's slow and longwinded explanations, Allie's powers have begun to feel like an anti-climax. By my understanding all she has is a little more control of the same thing the girls do. Right?

"Listen, Will.. This is really hard to explain from a personal and a scientific standpoint, okay? It's a phenomenon. Cleo controls and creates movements in the weather or bodies of water, right? Rikki heats water and climate, our friend Emma does the opposite, while Bella changes the molecular structure and texture of liquids. We know all this and Allie can do all of this."

"Right... So Allie's like a super mermaid or something? She's got a combination of all the girls' powers?"

My friend's breath catches in his throat. There is more to the story than what I had already heard. I can tell.

"That's not all, Will... Not only does Allie have a combination of all the others, but her control is more extensive and more manipulative. I guess, any matter containing water can selectively become an extension of her and under her control in a way... The thing is, brain matter is around 70% water, so, obviously that means that people are included in her control. She will probably be able to make them hotter and colder and all that, but she will also have the mechanics and physics behind Cleo and Bella's powers combined. My friend explained that she'll be able to override the signals their brains send to give her the control."

There is no way to reply to that. Seriously, give me a response to hearing that your FOUR year old daughter can control other human beings. That's not to mention the weather and vast bodies of water or matter containing water on top of that.

Lewis must have heard my wordless gawking noises across the line, after he proceeds to set into the reassuring process.

"Now remember that I can't be a hundred percent sure about any of

these details, but this is just what research my friend has discovered in the past. All the symptoms and all the facts add up with Allie, but there may be some small differences in what I'm telling you, okay? Now do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"The good news" I say with a monotone reply. No effort goes into my wording, my decision or my tone of voice. Instead, the focus is purely on ensuring that I don't have a quarter life crisis and meltdown in these moments as what is being said to me really begins to hit home and set in, registering within my mind.

"Right! The good news is that according to the research Max found and it makes sense with a few other mythology principles, Allie won't be able to do her people controlling-thing over Bella and the other girls. Since they are all mermaids, the mer in them will apparently be strong enough to fight against and override any of her control, just to stop the effect on themselves.

Lewis doesn't need my prompting to continue on to deliver the bad news.

"However... The bad news is that unless you decide to embrace the mer side of life and join the girls as a merman any time soon, it means that Allie's going to have that control over everyone else, like you and me, Zane, Kyle, Tam... Over pretty much everyone."

I haven't even thought about what I am doing. I am right on the very edge of meeting my tipping point. After I hear the last few words that my friend and the bearer of bad news uttered, I hung up on him and ended the call mid-conversation.

Standing there gawking in Bella's room I try to process, let alone come to terms with the fact that my four year old daughter has more control, more power on me than I have on her. And that is an entire decade before reaching the teenage years is even considered.

* * *

><p>Not long after I had ended the phone call with Lewis, Bella and I had dropped onto the end of her bed.<p>

I don't even have any idea of how long we have been there like that for. All we've done is sit. We haven't say a word, we haven't moved a muscle. All we've done is sit there and clutch each other's hands, holding onto one another as if for dear life as we look out her bedroom window that overlooks the darkened street.

"So how are you about this?"

"I don't know... " Bella sighs honestly, having found no better words to summarize our complete and total confusion over what we have learnt today, before she adds to her answer. "What about you? How are you holding up? Now are you wishing that I'd never told you about Allie after all?"

In answer to the question, I simply raise our entangled hands up to my lips and press a gentle kiss to the exterior of her petite hand.

"Don't say that. Of course not. We're in this together."

There is another sigh.

"Will? Our little girl's never going to be _normal_."

"I know... But that's one of the many reasons why I love her mother for that very same fact too."

There is a twinkle of a smile in Bella's eyes, before her blue eyes fade to the dark sadness once again.

"Allie and I share an incredible secret, but she's _always_ going to have to be steering clear of water. She's going to be coming up with excuses and ways to get out of sticky situations her whole life. At least I had a few years of knowing what life is like as being normal before I transformed, but poor Allie is never going to know what that feels like..."

It does make me sad knowing what Allie is going to have to struggle with for the rest of her life, hiding her tail and hiding her powers, but both Bella and I know that there is nothing that can be done to change the predicament now...

* * *

><p>A while later, after Bella and I eventually compose ourselves from the news we had received earlier in the evening enough to rejoin the others.<p>

In the open-area of the house, Rikki and Kyle are slouching comfily either end of the two-seater lounge, where their feet met and tangle questionably in the middle.

On the other side of the room, Tam appears to be doing well at looking after my daughter where they are sitting together at Bella's six-seated dining table, sharing Tam's phone as they play some of Allie's favourite games and apps.

"Hey Allie? Do you want to let Aunty Tam have a bit of a break and watch a movie? What movie do you want sweetheart?"

In the bedroom and after the phone call, Bella and I had made the decision to test out the theory that Lewis had delivered us with earlier.

"Okay! Hmmm... _The Lion King_! I want to watch _The Lion King_!"

Kyle happens to be the closest to the television. After Allie spoke, within seconds, he is off the lounge that he had been sharing closely with Rikki, immediately scavenging for the DVD that my daughter had requested.

It all makes sense... What Allie _WANTS_, Allie _gets_. Her control is expressed through the word _want_. She is too little to manipulatively seek out what she wants all the time, let alone control how she would get it. It makes sense for her power to be more selective or simplified in a way considering her age.

I share a look with Bella who is idle by my side. We were hoping that our nightmare is all just a dream, that we would wake up and that we would be able to forget the bizarre prospect, simply being able to tell or recall it as a far out story. Instead, we only get the confirmation that we did not want to receive.

Considering that Lewis and more than likely Cleo, already know everything about Allie's recent developments, Bella and I had made the decision in her room that we would tell Rikki our suspicion if all the dots connect after our one final test of the powers.

"Rikki? Can we talk to you?"

Rikki and Kyle are apparently attached at the hip as he stands up and trails behind my best friend's wife upon my call to her.

I mention to Tam as I leave the room if she can keep an eye on Allie, while Bella and I lead Rikki (and her twin who she had evidently been separated at birth from) further through the house, shutting us all in Allie's room to discuss behind closed doors.

"You know how Allie's been really sick? Lewis has been looking into it for us over the last few months. I just got a call from him tonight. He spoke to Max-somebody and they've come to the conclusion that it's Allie's powers developing which has been causing the symptoms and making her seem sick."

There is an instant shot of pure, vague, confusion as Rikki looks from Bella, to Kyle, to me and back to Bella.

"Um. Are you missing something?"

Bella is quick to explain why the presence of her brother is permitted to listen in on something that has always been so top secret and confidential.

"Oh, don't stress. Kyle knows. He's known since I was like 13, 14..."

Rikki appears a little set back by that revelation, but obviously it hasn't been enough to sidetrack her from the more compelling explanation of my daughter's powers. "Alright, we'll save that explanation for another day. But what is this about Allie's powers? Has she got the same as you or something?"

"No... Apparently mer-offspring are surpassingly stronger than the generation before it."

"Okay, now you're freaking me out. What do you mean by _surpassingly stronger_?"

There is a look between Bella and myself. The wordless communication determines who will go into the details and who will answer Rikki's question that is still 'freaking _us_ out' equally.

In the end, it is me who draws the short straw.

"Basically, long story short, she can control people. She has all the atmospheric heating, cooling, moulding and gelatinising powers that you girls do. But since the brain is predominantly water, her control

extends to controlling people kinaesthetically. It's like a super-super mermaid."

During the explanation that I give, the quiet door had unknowingly slowly creaked open, exposing the only other adult in the apartment... The adult that nobody has noticed to be listening in on the other side of the light-wood and echo-y door.

"What?! Allie's a freaking mermaid?! And she controls people?!"

Tam fires her questions at the group of us in hysterics, before she bolts away from us and away from her discovery of what just marks the beginning of all of the many secrets that have been concealed from her knowledge...

* * *

><p>So Kyle knows and Tam knows now. I've had questions whether Tam was a mermaid too and if Kyle knew about Bella, Allie and the others so I hope that cleared that up. When Tam wasn't immune to Allie's power as the mermaids are, that makes it pretty self-explanatory. **

Next chapter: How will Tam react in the aftermath of learning that Allie is a mermaid? Later, what devastating secret is Tam keeping that leads the sisters to connect?

**255 reviews for a new chapter. **

20. One Long, Long Day

Sorry that this chapter's been a bit slow in getting up. Had a lot on my plate and one of my best friends was in quite a serious car accident.

So, trust me to get a start on the third in the series the week before returning to my studies. Flip. I think FFP 3 is going to be a slowww work in progress. Not only am I working, got extra curriculums and studying but I'm also trying to achieve a mammoth study load. Some people have got half of it done over two years, but of course, I'm that person who tries to do the whole thing in twelve months. As a fellow student put it, "you're either very brave, or very stupid."

Oh, P.S. Any other Aussies been watching Hiding? Not gonna lie, it's pretty great. As are the leading males, ha ha! Plus there was 3 (albeit very brief) appearances by (red-head) Cariba Heine in the last two weeks episodes!

* * *

><p>Chapter **Twenty**** â€" ****One Long, Long Day**

Tam's POV

I stumble into the door-frame, clutching onto the wood briefly before continuing to my destination that is located further within our share house. The metres feeling like miles and miles away.

I only have one place in my mind, one mission.

It has to go. It all has to go.

... The pizza. The garlic bread that Rikki had insisted on ordering. The sugar-loaded, carbonated soft drink that Will had poured into my glass, along with refill upon refill into my glass with his good intentions. The decadent dessert that Bella had given us a big spiel on how she had made it earlier in the day, forcing us to try it like any good hostess would. The comfort food that I just gouged myself on minutes earlier on the way home... All of that has to go, but the thing that has to go most of all? The hurt.

My sister has been hiding one of the biggest secrets that I have ever come across so far in my life. That is not to mention that it's a pretty safe bet that my other two housemates have been in on the secret too considering that one guy is my sister's husband and the other is the father of the tot that I just overheard who is said to be a mermaid.

Who knows how long that has been going on for, whether Allie was born like that or if it was a more recent thing? How does that even work?! However, given the fact that I have never, ever had reason to suspect that a secret like that has unravelled and been dealt with at any time, I figure that it is a safe bet to assume that the little girl has been a mermaid for as long as I have known her over the last three and a bit years. That's if she is. But why, four twenty-something's would have a hush-hush conversation and make that up, is quite possibly an even less plausible idea than if she were a mermaid.

I don't even have the slightest clue what a real, un-mythical and completely normal human being would look like as a mermaid. In my shock and in my confusion, the only thing that I do know is that everyone has fooled me.

I feel like I have been betrayed! Or at least something close to that once again, since I have been shut out of an enormous secret that obviously no-one has deemed me as being trustworthy enough to know.

It reminds me of another scenario. It is just like I had been shut off from having the opportunity to be there and know my only sister's was getting married when Rikki and Zane had made the decision to elope months earlier.

Saying that, I know where she had and Zane had been coming from.

Weddings mean stress, compromise and planning and I know that neither my sister, nor my new brother-in-law are particularly good at any of those things. However, it is just a reminder. A hurtful reminder that I, as one of Rikki's few remaining family member's, had not been deemed as important enough to be a part of the big day that every sister would normally expect to be as involved as the bride is with her own wedding day.

As I think about it and continue to dwell on the fact that I hadn't been involved in the wedding and that I hadn't been involved in

Allie's secret and every pain and every hurt that feels as though it is consuming me, my stomach quakes within me, my throat burning in anticipation for the eruption that is set to occur. Normally it is at my command, but today it almost happens to be a natural occurrence, almost normal.

I put it down to all of the shock and revelations I have been exposed to not just today, but recently...

My sister had eloped with her long-term boyfriend away from their family and friends on an interstate trip. Her new husband had been arrested. Long after that, Zane had left Rikki as far from the woman she normally is after he cut all contact with her. Tonight, I'd stumbled across the fact that my sister is in on the secret that our friend's and my fellow housemate's daughter is a mermaid. On top of it all, I've been battling with my own private demons and hell that had returned from my past battle.

... Undiagnosed bulimia.

I know that I have it, no doubt. I've known for years and I definitely know that this isn't the first time.

Since I have been around 12, maybe 13, my eating and dietary tendencies have been on a slow, but decreasing decline. By the time I reached 15 years of age, it had come to a make or break point. Fortunately, I'd been able to make myself and conquer the disorder with the assistance of a person from my past.

However, again, with my slow relapse over the last few months, I have been fooling myself to think that I am still in control... That I am still the one who rules my condition, rather than the other way around. But that is not the case.

The bulimia, it is something I like to keep to myself. It's something I still like to keep below the surface. I used or tell myself it was because I knew that I could handle it and that I knew how to get back in control of my disorder.

I also know that I am kidding myself. Just because I can't hide the fact from myself and from my own gut instinct, it doesn't mean that I want to admit it or face it. The thought of that ordeal, the thought of having to go through that head-first is in itself is just a whole other world of scary and daunting that I don't and never have wanted to admit and face up to. I don't even think I'd be able to if I wanted to.

"Tam! Tam! Are you here?!" I hear the panic in my sister's voice from the other side of the house, where she has obviously just arrived home from Bella's, just as I have too.

I fail to answer her concern and her question, too busy trying to reach my own destination.

"Tam, I'm sorry! Just let me explain it to you. Tam!"

I weave through the maze of walls and doors in our house. I can barely wait, let alone even try to stop myself, before I reach the toilet bowl and I succumb to my habits, my uncontrollable urge to empty the contents of my stomach that had been filled over the course

of the evening, along with the pain and the throb that had been encompassing my heart and emotions as the hurt I have been bottling up for the last few months boiled over with this evening's revelation.

"Tam! Oh, Tam, are you alright?!" Rikki finds me, rushing to my side as her goose-chase around house comes to an end, regretfully, in the last place in our house that she looks, while I'm in the worst state that I'd never want her to see me in.

My sister quickly holds back my blond locks as she rubs my back. In all likelihood her thinking is that I have been struck by a common bout of nausea from gastro or something or the sort.

As much as I want to stop, especially given my vulnerability in front of my sister, I continue and continue on, unsatisfied until I feel that emptiness that comes with a peculiar satisfaction and false sense of healing.

I don't know how normal my bouts of sickness seem to Rikki. I don't know if she can realise how normal my completely self-induced vomiting is for me. In the state I'm in, I don't know much aside from one thing that I know with confidence that both Rikki and I can tell is far from normal...

Both Rikki and I are able to clearly see that the normal putrid textures and colours of bile are tainted by a colour that is far from normal with disturbing flecks of fresh, crimson red.

Normally, the after-effects, the sensation of emptying the sadness right down to the very literal pit of my stomach is soothing; comforting in the oddest way possible. However, today, seeing the red just instils a panic, a sensation that accelerates the pounding within my heart as I can feel my cheeks burn up, my hands almost beginning to shake out of pure nervousness and fear.

â€| This isn't supposed to be happening! My eating disorder is a way to free me from the difficulties in life, it is under my control. Not knowing why blood has made an appearance is nothing short of damn frightening and so far from the realms of my physical and mental control that I lost a long time ago.

"Oh gosh, Tam, that's ****blood****â€| We have to get you to the hospital â€" now."

The moment she is free to, my sister begins to pull me to my feet, supportively cradling me in her arms as she moves us out of the bathroom, clutching onto my shaking body as we trail out to the hallway, to the car and eventually to the Emergency room of the Robina Hospitalâ€|

To be quite honest, out of Rikki and myself, in this moment I can't tell you who is more scared.

* * *

><p>Since arriving at the hospital early yesterday evening, Rikki has barely moved an inch away from my side for more than a moment or two.<p>

After being subjected to many blood tests and many, many questions, the doctor finally enters my room the morning after being admitted to the hospital, following a sleepless night, to deliver my diagnosis that I am already more than aware of. My doctor is about to begin the whole 'I'm going to have to ask you to leave, unless you are immediate family'.

Rikki is obviously on the same wave-length as myself, perceiving any doctor's usual pattern as she gets in first. "Save it. She's my sister, I'm her guardian."

"Alright" the doctor proceeds, while I tune out. I don't need to hear it and I want to separate myself from the moment I am living in and particularly from Rikki's reaction that I know is coming for as long as and as greatly I possibly can in the limited moments I have left of holding this liberty. The liberty of my secret being confined to just me.

"-acute bulimia. It appears to have been a reasonably long-term c..." I tune out again, just hearing the mention of something about scarring and making my stomach bleed; an explanation for the blood that had freaked me out a day earlier.

Now, I have a whole new fear to freak me out and a whole new fear that I really do not want to face. That fear is called my sister.

I had been expecting yelling, I had been anticipating anger and a rage that I know from experience is Rikki's forte. I know that either of those options is terrifying, but the only thing I realise to be more panicking is silence. After listening to the doctor, with the shock and concern written and translated all over her face, Rikki doesn't speak a word to me, nor to the doctor before she simply walks out way too casually.

That and not knowing what is coming next is even scarier than if she had yelled as loud as she could for as long as she could while she demanded an explanation in her heat of the moment rage.

* * *

><p>Under an hour after her initial departure, Rikki returns to my room as silently as she left it.<p>

I can't read the expression on her face, even though a part of me doesn't even want to try and decode it.

If anything, my guess is that Rikki seems tired, worn out and almost numb. There is probably only so much caring and worrying your body and your heart will allow you to do before it shuts off. As a guess, with everything that has happened with Zane the last few months, Rikki's body has reached its threshold.

"I can explainâ€¦" I offer to my sister as she almost collapses onto the side of my hospital bed, narrowly missing my ankle.

"Start talking, Tam" Rikki says in a very uncharacteristic and monotone level. "I know it's a sickness. I know it's a coping mechanism. But what I don't know is why you never said a single thing."

Just like me, just like my triggers to binge-eat and forcibly counteract that, I can tell that Rikki is fed up of being one of the last in the line of people's thought processes and considerations.

"I've been a comfort eater all of my life... When things were hard at home with mum or when I didn't have anyone else or when things started to get tough, food would be what I turned to. It would be what I used to think would make me feel better."

"I can vouch for that... I probably eat more food than a pregnant elephant. But, just because I eat my weight in food, it doesn't mean that I feel the need to vomit it all back up again. I don't get that. I know it's not just a physical thing and it's deeper than that, but I just don't understand."

I sigh, closing my eyes for a brief blink-and-you-miss-it moment. However, that flicker of a moment is more than enough to relive and bring back all of the memories and trauma that I so desperately long to forget.

... The photos permanently etched and burnt scaringly into the back of my mind. The verbal ridicule that I can still hear echoing in the back of mind. The events of years ago. The good sensations, the feeling when I felt the consumable comfort and then thought that my sickness was the ultimate win-win to gluttony without repercussions. The bad feelings, smells, tastes... The sense of nausea being unescapable, everywhere, on my nose, face, hair...

I need to escape it all, even if that means letting someone else in.

"The vomiting, the bulimia... That kicked in when I was about 13, around when I started high school. That is when my self-awareness started to kick in and when I realised that my body shape was nothing like some of the pretty and popular girls. That, with a few girls bullying me and a snide remark or two from mum about my weight set it all off from there. By the time I was 14, I was addicted to it. I could barely keep a drink down for longer than five minutes, but I thought that it was all paying off. I thought that I had my escape, but I also had the figure I wanted - the size zero dream. What I didn't realise is how sickly I was at that point. I got a fright and fortunately it helped me to get the help that I needed and recover."

In my raw and triggering explanation that has truly just come from the bottom depths of my heart, I hadn't realised that my sister had shuffled closer to me on the bed until the moment that she wraps an arm around me and envelopes me in a hug within her arms.

"I am so sorry, Tam... That is a massive thing to shoulder and deal with so young and relatively on your own. Not to mention, keeping it from the others and I now... I am so sorry that you felt that you needed to go through that on your own. I wish you'd told me, but I understand why you didn't. The only thing is, I have one question - why? Why did all of that resurface again recently?"

I can't just come outright with it and say '_well, I think it was __**you**__ and your fault_', can I now?

"I think that I just struggled with my insecurities and self-worth around the time that you and Zane got hitched. I understand that eloping is what was best for you, but I made it about me and how I felt about being excluded from the wedding dayâ€¦"

"I guess that that's been on a slow and progressive boil since then, along with my other issues that have been getting worse. I'd turned to my comfort food, but then I started seeing through the looking glass and seeing you and your friends eat all the time but with such great bodies and that was all enough to reignite the bulimia issue again."

My breath becomes a little raspy as I pause before I continue to speak.

"I don't want you to feel bad about it, it's just my own problems. But hen, the fact that you and the others have been hiding the mermaid thing from me just added salt to that wound tonight and tipped it all over the edge. What is the deal with that by the way?."

In my older sister's arms, I can feel my shoulders being squeezed and held just a little tighter, but a whole load more supportively.

"Thank you for opening up to me, Tamâ€¦ You were the first person to do that with me in quite a while. As my sister, though, if you're anything like me, I know that can't have been easy for you. In exchange, I will try and explain the Allie thing to you... why everyone else knows, but why we never let you in on it."

I give my sister the nod she needs to proceed with the explanation that I really do not think anything could prepare me for.

"Well, yes, what you heard is true. Allie's a mermaid, Tam. You heard all of that tonightâ€¦ The thing is, and the reason why everyone else is in on it is because so is Bella _and_ me, _and_ Cleo and you know our friend, Emma? We all are too."

It takes a lot to render a Chadwick girl speechless. For both Rikki and I to be pushed to this state is almost unheard of. However, just as Rikki didn't know what to say or do with my knowing diagnosis earlier in the day, I don't know what to say or do about my sister's own shocking revelation that she has just dealt me moments earlier.

"What? How?" I eventually manage to formulate and say, despite my deep-rooted shock and confusion.

"For three of us, aside from Bella and Allie, it happened when we were 16â€¦ Zane was responsible for us ending up on a boat that eventually drifted out to Mako Island, you know, just off the coast. We started exploring the island and got further into and deeper in the rainforest. That day was a full moon and we found a little cave and moon poolâ€¦ The next day, ten seconds after each of us got wet, we each grew a tail and that was that. I'm sorry for keeping it from you, but we have had a fair few bad experiences and brushes with exposure, so we make sure that there's only a handful of people that knows about it."

I slowly take the information in that I am dealt as I try to absorb the secret that I had not been supposed to uncover, for good reason.

"I see why you didn't tell me, I probably wouldn't have either if I were you. It just hurts, you know? A part of me always feels like I'm the outsider; the sister you never wanted."

Rikki gives me another squeeze of her energy that translates into one sister comforting the other.

"Tamâ€¦ I may have taken a while to warm up to you, but trust is something that has hurt me many times in the past, so it takes a while for me to let people in like that. Now though, I am really glad to have a sister and have you in my life. I'm just sorry that my actions led you to doubting that."

My sister takes a deep breath before she continues to speak.

"I tell you whatâ€¦ I'll forgive you for hiding the bulimia, if you forgive me for not telling you about the mermaid thing. But from this point on, no more secrets, okay?"

I give my older and only sibling a small smile that naturally comes across my face before I give her a response.

"It's a deal. No more secrets."

"None. Ever. We'll get you through this _Tamsin_. I'll carry you there if I have to."

* * *

><p>Despite everything, she is there for me. With every gruelling test, appointment and trial-some moment that kick-starts my road to recovery, Rikki is there. Through all of it.<p>

Recently, I have doubted the strength of bloodlines and the loyalty that goes with being family. I thought that the connection is nowhere as strong or as important as I feel that it is or as I feel that it should be.

My insecurities and bulimia might have been started from the seed of doubt that my sister isn't interested in me, nor does she hold me of the same value as I, her. However, I had been wrong. _So_ wrongâ€¦

But while I am wrong about Rikki, I know that I have confined myself into a corner, trapping me in a state and setting me on a road to recovery that I know from past experience is going to be far from easy to worm out of all over again.

* * *

><p>So, there we have it, there's Tam's secret. Insert thoughts here. Gauging the reviews, not many people guessed it but I've put little clues in there since very early on in the sequel. I find that big storyline's are really hard to find a balance of foreshadowing too much or not enough.

****Now I know what a sensitive issue I am handling in this one and I really hope that I could do it justice. I'm no expert, but in the very least I hope I haven't offended anyone in any way shape or form.

****270 reviews and I'll give you an update!****

****Next chapter: Which character is going to be next to be brought back? Any guesses as to who and why?****

21. Friends Like These

****Whoops. Has it really nearly been two months since I updated? My bad. In that time I've been overseas and back. Then, the day I came home was the beginning of a month-long sickness while juggling the 2 weeks of assignments that I'd missed and more work hours than I've ever had! But, finally I had a chance to pop this one up. ****

****It was briefly mentioned in the A/N on the last chapter, but I've started writing FFP 3. At THAT point, every chapter was 100% planned out. However, sometime between then and now, I've done some thinking and now I'm not sure of about 70% of the plots. The big one which encapsulates Cleo and Lewis mostly is staying the same, I may just add to that. However, I also have mains for a Rikki/Zane/Tam storyline and I'm not sure whether to leave it with what I had planned, or, to make it even bigger and more dramatic (but it would also fit in better that way too). Then, for Bella and Will's big one, I had one plot which I thought I'd settled on but now I'm kind of undecided on about 3 for them.****

****Thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter and double thank you for you guys' well wishes after my friend's accident. She's doing really, really well and getting there now :)****

****Terima kasih! (Like the only Indonesian I learnt while over there - look it up.)****

*** * ***

><p>Chapter Twenty One - Friends Like These

Cleo's POV

I always love a good party. I embrace the joy and happiness of every and any occasion that can be celebrated with my family and close friends. So, waking up this morning, I cannot wait for the events that lay ahead for the rest of the day.

Today, is the day that Rikki and Bella have been planning for my baby shower.

It's generally customary for baby showers to be held as a surprise event for the mother-to-be, but after Rikki and I hosted an epic fail of a surprise baby shower for Bella almost five years ago, we learnt our lesson about the downsides to surprises. Due to a communication mishap between myself and the other coordinator, Rikki and I managed to completely stuff up the dates and months for the shower we were holding Bella. So, long story short, Bella actually had her baby attend her baby shower since she'd given birth to Allie the week

before the date we had planned the baby shower for. So, with my baby shower, Rikki made it well and truly clear that she would do anything to avoid hosting another epic fail of a baby shower and didn't intend for the event to be a surprise.

In the early stages of their planning, my friends had also turned to my step-mother and sister for a lot of advice in planning details so those two had sort of been pulled into hosting my baby shower along with Rikki and Bella. Somewhere in that time, the venue had decided to be held at my own home and since 8 AM this morning, I have been able to hear the four girls and my husband bustling around downstairs, shifting furniture, hanging, debating and then re-moving decorations and trying to work out the floor plan of my families dining, living and lounge room.

"How's it going out there?" I ask Lewis as he enters our bedroom, looking frazzled and red in the face.

"It's, it'sâ€¦ good" my husband says hesitantly, trying to lie and conceal the truth that I plainly see, reading straight through him, especially after hearing all the interactions coming from the storey below me. I know he has my best intentions at heart, trying to keep me from worrying or fretting about the preparation for the event from our bedroom that I have been banished to until I am allowed to come down, once the guests start arriving.

I warn Lewis simply and it does not take long, only moments, before my husband caves and spills the real truth. "Lewisâ€¦"

"Ugh, just be glad that you're up here Cleo. Sam's getting all perfectionist-y, Kim's disagreeing with every single person's decisions, Rikki's being short and not in a party mood given everything that's going on, Bella cannot make up her mind and I have had to move every, single, friggin piece of furniture around down there _at least_ four times."

I laugh and press a kiss to my husband's frowning face. "Just stay strong and think about that pretty, female-free laboratory that you get to spend all afternoon alone in once you're finished up here."

"That's true. I think I'm going to need all of the strength that I can to get through setting up this thing with four women who have strong opinions... and just keep _changing_ those opinions!"

Lewis lays a kiss to the top of my head before walking over to the door as I can see that he is preparing to exit our room.

"Alright. I better get back to it before Rikki and her not-so desirable mood get their hands on the staple gun out there!"

I laugh again and wave my husband out of the room as he walks out, just minutes after entering our bedroom in the first place. By leaving me, he also leaves me to my isolation once again until I'm given the message that I am allowed to go down and return to my families downstairs area once again...

* * *

><p>After another hour, Bella finally knocks on my door to let me

know that the guests have arrived and that I can finally attend my own baby shower.<p>

"You excited?" my friend asks me conversationally and in a low whisper, for no apparent reason.

I nod as we start to walk down the stairs, before realising that Bella is looking straight ahead, not at me, so she would have completely missed my gesture to answer her question before I proceed to deliver it verbally.

"Yeah, I am. Thanks again for helping to organise this... I feel so special."

My friend gives me a gentle, playful nudge in my side. "That's because you are special. Now go and enjoy one of your last occasions of your freedom!"

Walking downstairs is made a little daunting as all conversation being carried out in the room comes to an immediate halt when my family and friends below catch sight of me making my entrance uncomfortably and far more grandly than I would have liked to as I walk down the staircase.

Fortunately, I can feel the pressure release its grasp and hold on me a little more as a slightly awkward moment ensues between everyone below me. A few people burst out 'surprise', namely my aunt, cousin and two of my childhood friends. Following this, they and a few other people look around the room and over to me, trying to wordlessly gauge whether or not the event is a surprise baby shower or not, working out who is wrong and who is right.

Beside me, Bella bites her lip uncomfortably and on the ground below, both my sister and Rikki look on the verge of laughter, biting their tongues as I try to pinpoint which one would crack and break first. At the same time, my stepmother begins to whisper to my aunt and cousins what I can only guess to be the fact that she is trying to inform them of how my baby shower is not in fact a surprise as they had originally thought and expressed, loudly, when I walked downstairs moments ago.

After I mingle with my guests for a few minutes and receive what feels like a thousand 'hi, how are you', 'congratulations!' and hugged greetings, the baby shower finally begins to get underway...

The girls announce the plans for the day; eating, drinking; opening the presents and playing a few completely baby themed games. None of these proceed before the announcement that comes from Bella as she speaks aloud to the group.

"Now, thanks for coming to Cleo's baby shower everyone. I know that most times, the gift opening is one of the last things that you do" Bella says as she gestures to the giant pile of presents that I hadn't yet seen sitting in the corner of the room. "-but right now we're going to do something a little bit different today. We're actually going to do the gift opening first off now."

After opening the assortment of humorous outfits and especially unisex t-shirts from Rikki, the enormous range of organic (mer-safe)

lotions, gels, creams, soaps and moisturisers for babies, along with a whole assortment of toys, bits and pieces for the nursery, baby clothes and blankets of every season, colour and thickness, I think that it's safe to say that we had all had enough of gift-opening.

"Now, I have one more present for you, Cleo. It's imported."

After whispering to me, Rikki dashes off towards the front door of my home and goes outside for roughly half a minute before returning indoors again. However, this time she is not alone like she had been upon exiting.

"Emma! What are you doing here?!" I squeal, rushing over to one of my three best friend's, whom I last saw over a year ago.

The blond and I wrap our arms around each other in a comfortable and excited bear hug for as long as possible before I remember the other twenty or so guests in the room that I had long forgotten about after the surprise attendee.

"As if I would miss my best friend's baby shower, Cleo" Emma smiles warmly.

"It's a bit of a different story when you're living halfway across the _world, _Em! But, saying that, I am so glad that you're here."

After I have the first dibs on hugging and greeting Emma, there are several other people in the room like some of my old classmates that I have kept in touch with, Lewis's mother and Bella who come up to greet my childhood best friend who has been living abroad since the final year of high school.

* * *

><p>Later in the day, after the baby shower wrapped up and long after some of the remaining guests left, myself, Rikki and the less familiar Bella finally have the time and privacy to catch up with Emma. So far she has been through every little detail of her studies, her apartment, her family, her adventures, her travels and her relationship.<p>

As much as I have missed her and as much as I have missed having one of my longest best friends in my life, seeing her almost day to day, I can see that her families decision to pack up and move from their Gold Coast residence has resulted in little to regret.

"So how long are you here for?! How long have we stolen you for?"

"I've taken some annual leave off from work, so I'll be here for a few monthsâ€¦ At least until this little one's made an arrival. There's no way that Auntie Emma's leaving the country until I've had baby McCartney cuddles."

My friend gestures to my bulging stomach and the visible sign of what has been growing within me.

"It's still so weird seeing you pregnant, with a bellyâ€¦ You've been

as thin as a twig our entire lives. That, along with the fact that I've known you since we were the baby's is taking me a bit of getting used to!"

I laugh at Emma's explanation, before Rikki changes the subject of our conversation by asking Emma a question.

"So where's Ash? How is he?"

Since our second to last year of high school, Emma and Ash have been on and off. The two would tend to be off while she and her family were travelling, but as soon as she began studying or settling in a country for a time, he would never be far behind and the two would rekindle while he would manage to pick up different management jobs globally. However, after Emma began studying abroad in Nepal for the last twelve months, she and Ash have been rather solid as far I know, based on what I have heard from both parties.

"He's going well aside from being a bit grumpy from the jetlag - I think he's glued to the TV remote back at the hotel. We will have to do a dinner sometime over the next few days. He's looking forward to seeing you guys again!"

"Yes! It's been so long since we've seen him and caught up" I say enthusiastically, while Rikki too agrees with Emma and I's plans and counts herself in.

There is a silence in the room and Emma and I must make a mental note of the same person at the same time, who is sitting in the room with a calm smile, but clearly feeling a little uncomfortable and out of the loop. I am glad for Emma to make an effort to reach out to my other friend who has had very little and surpassingly less to do with Emma than Rikki and I have after years of friendship.

"So Bella, don't you have a little girl? Sorry, I can't even remember her name. I just remember her being pretty cute when I met her last time. Where's she today?"

Emma and Bella have met in the past and while they are both always been pleasant and friendly to each other, the fact they haven't spent much time together means that their relationship has never really scratched the surface and become anything other than superficial acquaintances. Thankfully, there has never, ever been any confliction or any jealousy between the two who are both considered a part of our group, but were rarely ever a part of it at the same time as each other.

"Yeah, I do... Thanks. Allie's with her dad today."

"I'd love to see her again. She was a bit of a cutie and I bet she's grown heaps since I last saw her. You'll have to bring her with you next time we meet up!"

I appreciate Emma paying an interest in and making an effort for my usually bubbly friend who seems more than uncomfortable on the outer. This is especially nice considering that in the past, Emma has been less receptive while Bella has made more of an effort to bond and get to know each other. However, today, the interaction is like a role reversal for Emma who has always been more conservative around the newer member of our group that was brought in years ago, not long

after she left.

One development that I hope for during the time that Emma has returned for is that the two different worlds and dimensions that equate to our group will be able to be bridged together and fused in a way. Rikki, Lewis and I are the common denominator between Emma, Bella, their consecutive partners and their separate lives in the group that one girl left just before the other joined.

"We'll have to do a big group thing together! A party at Mako or somethingâ€¦ You can bring Will and Allie, Bella and Em, you'll have to bring Ash. It'll be great!"

I look around at the girls that are by my side. Rikki looks as keen as punch at my idea, far brighter and chirpier than she had been earlier in the day, looking just about as enthusiastic as I am for the idea. Bella and Emma wordlessly look over to each other and share an exchange of glances and I can only assume that they are confirming that neither is treading on the other's toes and making the other uncomfortable. In this case, I feel a little relief as the only exchange after the look is a mutual smile before Emma speaks first.

"Yeah that would be great. I'd love getting to know the others more."

"Fantastic. I can't waitâ€¦ It's _so_ good to have you home, Em."

* * *

><p>"Hey" Lewis says as he walks in, immediately pressing a kiss of greeting to my lips. "How did the baby shower go?"<p>

"Really goodâ€¦ And guess what?! Emma flew in especially for it! She's down here until the baby's born!" I gradually bubble over with excitement as I explain the most significant event of today.

"Oh really? What a nice surprise, hey?"

I see the askew smile form on my husband's lips and by this point I already have my suspicions. I eye Lewis intently, trying to watch him closely to pinpoint any body language or indicating factors that may even slightly tip off and confirm my suspicions.

"You knew, didn't you? You knew Rikki had been planning for Emma to come back for the baby shower! And you didn't tell me!"

Immediately, the second I catch him out, the slightly mischievous grin spreads across his face and contaminates his expression, giving him and his abysmal hiding abilities away immediately.

"I was the one who kick-started the idea, actually. I mentioned it to Rikki about surprising you by seeing if Emma would be interested in coming back for the baby shower and then those two took it over and teed it up."

I gasp and Lewis's face lights up even more with pride at the surprise he had been able to contribute to pulling off and executing as a surprise for me.

"No way! You sneak! If you got away with that, it makes me wonder what else have you been hiding and arranging behind my back?!" I laugh, after I give his arm a slap that is no way hard enough to hurt, with the intention of simply causing a sting and getting my point across to him.

"Well, now that you mention it... There's my secret family and my other wife I'm hiding in Brisbane, my multi-million dollar job that I landed a few years ago and that beach house that I bought in the Bahamas last week!"

After Lewis's joke, I respond by teasingly giving my husband's stomach a nudge with my elbow. "Oh shush, you. Bet your other wife isn't a mermaid, you bigamist."

Our mutual laughs eventually subside and Lewis re-positions himself more comfortably and seriously besides me.

"Seriously though, how did the shower go? Good turn out? My mum didn't spend the entire afternoon reminiscing about when I was 'just a boy'?"

"It was a really great baby shower. Pretty much everyone came and your mum really managed to impressively refrain herself from telling too many of those stories at all. Seriously though, are we going to have one spoiled and very unisex kid, or what? You should see all the presents and the mountain of stuff we received for it. We are going to have to change his or her clothes hourly just to manage to get through all of the stuff that we have been given!"

Lewis smirks before teasing me and my love of fashion and clothing. "Constant outfit changes? And you'd _hate_ that, wouldn't you?"

"I like clothes, so what?"

"So, nothing? I'm sure you understand my science fetish just as little as I understand your enthusiasm for bodily coverings."

There's a pause between our conversation and a silence before my husband speaks up once again.

"Hey, you know what I just realised? Unless any of our other friends or family members decide to pull a big surprise out of their hat quickly, the next thing we'll probably be celebrating will be the birth of bubs! At whatever point this year that that will occur!"

I smile and glance down at my burgeoning baby belly before returning my gaze to Lewis. "Yeah! That's true. Wow..."

Given that the only date we have to approximate a due date of the baby is knowing the day that I learned of the pregnancy. Aside from only knowing that there is no way we would have our child any later than eight or nine months from that day, we are really clueless as to any day or date to expect the addition to our family.

Just like a due date, Lewis and I are equally oblivious to just _how_ _soon_ and early the impending arrival of our unborn child is set to

beâ€|

* * *

><p>Oh my goodness I wrote that chapter so long ago. Seriously, I wrote it after attending my own friend's baby shower and her baby is now 8 months old.

**285 reviews for a brand new chapter, babes. **

Next chapter: I'm bringing yet another character back when poor Will has to deal with Allieâ€| and her powersâ€| and Sophieâ€| and Bella.

22. The Prodigal Sister

**Whoops. I SO intended for this chapter to get up so much sooner than what it has, but life hasn't quite allowed for that. Fortunately I'm nearing the end of the semester and should have a couple weeks of break before getting back into studying, but there's been quite a lot of deadlines and long assignments before now. It got pretty hectic in my personal life too among that. As I told my sister, over the course of FOUR days, there had been a birth, death and marriage among my family and close friends. **

**Anyway, moving on. New chapter is here for you to enjoy. Personally, I'm pretty chuffed with how it's turned out. It may be a little rough around the edges though, 'scuse me. I'm here proofreading it at 1:30 in the morning as any good dingbat does. **

Enjoy! x

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty **Two ****â€" ****The Prodigal Sister**

_Will's__ POV_

Today is the first time that I am looking after my daughter on my own since the shocking revelation and discovery of her powers and the extent of them. Since that day, Bella and I have been teaming up, trying to face and control her powers together considering that only Bella can defy Allie's 'wants', literally.

For me, the fact that my daughter has more control over me than what I have over her just brings a whole new meaning to the term 'daddy's little girl'.

Fortunately, so far Bella and I have been able to pinpoint the fact that whenever Allie exclaims that she 'wants' something, her powers automatically set that want into action at the expense of unintentionally taking control of anyone who is around her at that expense.

However, today is different and today is a little petrifying.

It resembles the first day that I looked after Allie on my own, ever.

I have no idea what to do when something arises that I don't know how to deal with and it essentially becomes a vicious circle.

Today, Bella left just minutes ago to attend Cleo's baby shower and while our friend wouldn't have minded if Bella had brought Allie, we had already decided earlier that it would be best for me to look after her. We reached this conclusion since we barely know anything about her powers and we don't want to put our daughter in a room where she could potentially exhibit her new powers and control on anyone other than Bella, Rikki and Cleo.

I had already decided earlier that I would try to bring out my inner-Lewis and test out a few little experiments and trials on Allie while it is just the two of us and while we have the house to ourselves.

"Allie. Can you tell what something that you want in this room is?"

I am careful with my wording, trying to keep her request to a small scale to avoid asking her 'What is something you want' and being forced to somehow, uncontrollably fulfill her want for a unicorn or dolphin, or worse yet - a sibling.

"I want... Um. I want to play that pretty, colourful game on Uncle Zane's computer!" Allie eventually requests.

Ever since Zane had shown her Bejewelled Blitz on his laptop a week or so before his arrest, Allie has thought the game is basically the best thing since sliced bread and has asked to play it on the laptop that has been just collecting dust ever since then.

Unsurprisingly and expectantly, both Allie and I are at Zane's laptop within seconds and I have no control over the fact that I am turning the computer on and starting it up.

As soon as Allie finishes playing one round of the arcade game, I can feel the control I am under being relinquished a little. The sensation, the concept is indescribable. I have no other feeling or experience that can even slightly relate to being affected by Allie's power.

After I conduct the initial experiment, asking Allie what she wants in the room, as well as another trial asking her about something she has been thinking about wanting, I feel as though I am making a small amount of headway.

The fact that as soon as she says and expresses herself, telling me what she wants, it happens, while something she has just been thinking about wanting goes unfulfilled and only confirms Bella and I's suspicions and previous hypothesis. Allie's control over people and elements is limited to her expression through speech, like how the girls manoeuvre their individual control through physical movements in their hands in conjunction with their minds.

I also manage to determine the fact that she only displays the power when she says 'I want'. After considering this alternative, I test the fact by asking her to make all sorts of requests by asking 'can I have' or 'I would like' and as many other variations of 'I want' as I could come up with, meaning that only those two words are the route

to and source of releasing Allie's power.

Now that I have a few more answers and a loophole, it is up to me to find some way for my daughter to abide with the loophole, exhibiting the greatest obedience rate possible when four year old children are not exactly renowned for their compliance.

"Allie. Can you remember that book I showed you a few weeks ago about the little boy that didn't listen to his mum and dad?"

The little head nods up and down definitively, blond locks of hair cascading everywhere freely. "Yeah! That's the one with the scary dog."

Bella and I had recently gone halves in buying this book series for toddlers with little manners and principles told in a fairy-tale storybook-like format. We split the books on everything from respecting your elders, to being honest and I ended up with the story that covers obeying your parents. I'd read it to her as a bedtime story. The story was almost a gimmick of The Lion King where big cats are replaced with big dogs, the African savannah is replaced with an Amazonian jungle and the main character of the story disobeys his father at the cost of his parent's life. Heavy stuff for a kid, but it had seemed to work with Allie for following few days after I read it to her.

"Yeah that's the one sweetheart. Can you remember why it's important to listen to your mum and dad?"

My daughter gives me another big, confident nod. "Cause the little doggy's daddy got hurt when he didn't listen to him."

"That's right Allie, good girl" I smile and press a kiss to her gorgeous hair. "Now, like that story, I am going to tell you not to do something and you're going to need to listen to me and obey that."

"What is it?"

"You know how when there's something that you'd like, you tell me or anyone else, '_I want it_', because that's not good manners and it is really important for you to say '_can I please have it_', okay?"

I can see the confusion sweep across my daughter's face, puzzling her.

"Can you practice saying that? Say: '_can I please have it_'?"

"Can I please have it?" she copies, imitating my speech from just a moment earlier, although I can see that she is neither confident, nor certain of what she is reciting.

I smile and I see my expression penetrate into my daughter's confidence a little as she reciprocates the smile happily.

"Did I get the words right, daddy?"

Allie and I are interrupted and a little startled when we hear a knock at the front door when we aren't expecting anyone home for hours.

"Yes, you did. Now, stay here little girl. I'll be right back."

I tell Allie to wait for me where I'd been hanging out with her in the lounge room, while I rush to answer the door. I know I am the only one home who can answer the door, with the girls at Cleo's baby shower and Zane obviously accounted for.

"Will!"

I barely have a chance to open the door before two arms latch around me, along with the excitable call of my nickname.

"Hey Soph! Isn't this is a surprise? What are you doing here?!"

"Am I not allowed to pay my baby brother a visit when we're in the same state?"

With a light laugh, I pull my sister into a proper two-way hug. Sophie doesn't need an answer to her rhetorical question.

Obviously the ruckus and noise that my reunion with Sophie catches my daughter's attention in the next room over as she wanders into the hallway of our share house.

"Daddy?" A little voice asks from where the owner cowers behind the archway that separates the hallway from the lounge, kitchen and dining area.

"Come here, Allie" I break away from my older sister and open my arms out to my daughter. "There's someone I want you to meet."

In the past, Sophie has never wanted to even acknowledge her niece and the fact that she has one. She isn't rude about it and she isn't particularly nasty, but she has just never wanted anything to do with her, even avoiding meeting Allie at all costs.

In my family, Allie is just a conversation and a situation that is shied away from. It isn't a situation that I necessarily liked, nor a scenario that I would have chosen, but right now is my time to bridge my two worlds that rarely ever collide.

Allie doesn't hesitate to run into my arms, but I can tell that she is still a little skeptical and wary of the unfamiliar, flaming red-head woman across from her.

"This is daddy's big sister. She is your Aunty Sophie, Allie."

Any uncertainty washes away from Allie as a realisation of Sophie's family connection to her sinks in her mind. It doesn't take long at all for her shyness to disappear completely as she reverts back to the bubbly little girl that I know and love.

"Hi! My name's Adelaide - not Perth!"

I laugh at the scene of Allie and her innocence in front of me, as well as the memory of how that introduction had been instilled in my daughter.

Before he'd been arrested, Zane had been asking Bella questions about

her name, Adelaide, not Allie and how or why she had chosen that name. This had led to a discussion of everything which became ironic when her name was also the name of an Australian city. All of the discussion and all of Zane's amusement led to him deciding to teach Allie how to introduce herself... Initially trying to get her to say "_my name's Adelaide - not Brisbane_", but at three and a half, she hadn't been able to remember the pronunciation of Brisbane, Melbourne or Tasmania.

"Did she really say what I think she said? I knew you were too immature for kids!"

The tone of my older sister's voice is stern, disciplinary and showcases her authority over me, much like I had been accustomed to hearing from her for as long as I can remember. However, despite her voice, I can see a little twinkle in her eye and I know that she had been impressed, or at least amused.

"Sorry... That was a line that Zane taught her."

"Zane Bennett? There's a blast from the past... How is he?"

Despite all of the time that has passed, I can tell that my sister's attention and interest had been at least a little piqued at the mention of my housemate's name.

"He's _married_... to Rikki" I enunciate for emphasis, given that I don't really know how he is going currently in jail, seeing as I had cut contact with him after he had cut contact with his wife. "But he's... _away_ at the moment."

The look on Sophie's face is enough for me to know to change the subject.

"So... Have you got anything planned for your afternoon? You can have lunch here and hang out with us, if you'd like to?"

There is a hesitancy to my sister who gives my oblivious daughter a once-over. "Alright. I guess it won't kill me..."

* * *

><p>Surprisingly, the afternoon has been pleasant. There is still a slight distance between Sophie and Allie, but my daughter's innocence and friendliness has been bridging that gap reasonably well.<p>

Now, Allie has not long been put down for a nap, leaving just my sister and I to have a bit of one-on-one time.

"I think I see a lot of you when you were young in Allie."

"Really? What makes you say that?"

I have always known that Bella's genetics are more than prevalent in our child, but hearing that mine are at least recognisable is really something that I am not used to neither seeing or hearing.

"She has your manner and our eyes. And, she's got the same curiosity as you. Hanging out with her actually reminded me so much of playing with you when you were little" my sister pauses and takes a brief

break from speaking and exhales a sigh before she continues once again. "I know that I've known that you've had Allie for years now, but I still can't wrap my head around her. I mean, you're a _dad_, Will."

"Really? A dad? No way... Thanks for letting me know. That really clears things up and I guess that may be why this random little four year old has been calling me that for the last few years..."

Sophie elbows me in my rib-cage with the force that any sibling seems to be born and instilled with. The force is hard enough to hurt and to get her point across, but not hard enough to do any damage.

"Shut up, you... You know what I mean. It's just weird that you're a dad and that there's a little person calling you dad. I always knew that I'd be playing aunty Sophie one day, but I had no idea that it would be so soon. I'm still working at getting over the fact that you have a _kid_. A freaking kid. That's pretty huge, Will."

I know that there is a sense of disapproval and negativity attached to Sophie's words, but I ignore it and smile, translating her words my own way.

"I'm sorry, Soph. I know that you were always driven by the image of seeing my name down as one of the sporting and diving greats and that you worked damn hard to help me to achieve that, but that isn't what I want anymore. While I still loving recreational diving, I fell out of love for doing it competitively."

"But being a family man and playing daddy day care isn't really you either, Will..."

I've always liked kids and I had always wanted my own kids one day, but I can see the point that my sister is making.

For as long as Sophie and I can probably remember, we have been competitive and we have always worked to push each other to get further, faster, bigger, better and stronger. I can see how sacrificing that to pursue a run-of-the-mill job to support and assist with raising my daughter can be translated as me coming to a standstill, letting that attitude retire.

"Maybe a few years ago, I would have agreed with you, but I have Allie now, Sophie. You can't begin to understand how happy she makes me. I think that I appreciate it especially because I missed so much of her first year... What's important to me is different nowadays. I want to know what her least favourite food is this week, what her favourite movie is today and whether she's having more of a _Barbie_ or a baby doll sort of day."

I fail to suppress the smile that comes naturally to me when I talk or think about my little girl. This obviously does not go unnoticed by Sophie as she imitates my expression a little with a smile beginning to form very slightly on her lips.

"I know that I probably went ape with training you, but all I want is for you to be happy... That's why I became the freak of a trainer I did. I thought you wanted to be the best and I knew that you could be. I worked you so hard with training because I didn't want _my_ training to be the reason that _you_ didn't reach the pro-circuit or

level that I thought that you wanted to get to."

I pull my sister into my arms and into a familiar hug, a position that we have both held each other in many, many times over the years. I've always known that she always has what she believes to be my best interests at heart, even if she is off the mark or if she doesn't express that care in the best way imaginable.

"And I know that, Soph. Before we moved here, that was my dream and that was what made me happy. But that dream slipped away when I realised that there is more to life than my diving dream which would have probably left me feeling pretty empty if and when I reached it. It's not like that with Allie though... She just makes me so happy. My life feels like it has more of a purpose now, raising her. I just love the fact that Bella and I influence her and that we are predominantly in control of what sort of life she has and the sort of person she will be."

Sophie sighs, taking a moment to readjust her own thinking before she speaks to me.

"Settling down and being a family man so young might not have been the path that I would have chosen for you, but at the end of the day, I just want you to be happy... Even if that means a standard job, sharing a house with a bunch of your friends and focusing on raising a child with your girlfriend."

I smile. Sophie's approval is something I don't need and by the sounds of it, I haven't truly had it for a few years now. Even though I'd had a feeling about it in the past, considering that she had never shown any interest in the newer part of my life and my life that involved my daughter, it seems that now, Sophie is at peace with my decisions and the path that my life has taken.

This is all making for a poignant and sweet moment with my older sister... Until the knock on the door before whomever it is proceeds to walk into my home.

"Will? Are you here?" there is a pause and a series of noises from apparent footsteps and walking, before Bella trails into the lounge room looking for me where Sophie and I already are.

"Hey Will" she smiles instantly, before the girl beside me catches her attention, not necessarily in a good way. "And _Sophie_â€|"

"Bellaâ€| Long time, no see" there is a sudden chill in the room and an iciness between the girls that both mean so much to me individually, yet had never truly been able to see eye-to-eye with each other. "How have you been?"

"Good, thanksâ€| Yourself? How long are you up here for?" my girlfriend's response to my sister is short, sharp and shiny.

Neither girl is necessarily being rude to the other, something I have always been able to identify if and when it happens in the past, but instead I can just see how uncomfortable both girls are. However, I can almost bank on the fact that if I am not sitting in between the two as a mediator and as the only connection that the two girls have

to each other, I am sure that things would not be half as pleasant as they currently are.

"I've been fine. I'm just up here for a few days with work and I just made sure that visiting this one was a priority" Sophie replies, gesturing towards me in reference to who the 'this one' is in her explanation, in case anyone is thick enough not to realise it.

Bella nods as an uncomfortable, cold, noise-free silence settles over the group of us until my girlfriend eventually breaks it quickly, but not quite quickly -or soon- enough.

"So where's Allie?"

I am the first to answer. "She went down for a nap about a half hour ago. Soph and I wore her out playing with her. How'd the baby shower go?"

Although I try to make it as subtle as possible, I do add the fact that myself _and_ Sophie had been looking after her and playing with her together, hoping that the comment would at least minimise a _little_ of the frost between the two girls.

"The baby shower was good. It all went smoothlyâ€¦ Everyone came, Cleo cried. The presents were opened, Cleo cried. Rikki surprised Cleo with their friend Emma coming, Cleo cried. We ate, Cleo criedâ€¦"

"I'm sensing a pattern there" I allude to Bella with a chuckle as she just increases her own smile that rebounds back towards me. Becoming absorbed with my girlfriend briefly out of habit, I almost forget that my sister is still there, standing as awkwardly as ever. Looking back over to Sophie cuts Bella and I's moment as we all revert back to our previous positions and stances.

Another silence helplessly falls across the three of us as we uncomfortably look between each other, but I can tell that both Sophie and Bella are trying to keep their gaze locked on me for as long as is normal or for as long as possible.

"I guess that I better get going. I came straight here from the airport so I haven't even had a chance to drop my luggage off back at the boat shack.

Sophie almost bolts for the door immediately, before I follow behind her, telling Bella that I will be back in a moment and that I will see Sophie out to the door.

"Wait up" I call out and grab the wrist of my sister's arm, eventually stopping her by the door after following her and trailing behind her footsteps before that point. "Thanks for dropping in to see me. It made for the best surprise getting to see you unexpectedly."

"Yeah, it was good seeing you tooâ€¦ And meeting your-" Sophie pauses. The word that follows it obviously does not come out easily or naturally for her. "Your _daughter_."

I smile. It isn't much and isn't a huge deal, but I can see the effort that my sister is making, which means extending herself

outside of her comfort zone.

"Thanks for not shutting Allie down or anything. I know she's a touchy subject for you, but it really does mean a lot to me that you made an effort with her."

Sophie nods. I can tell that she is about to say something, but stops herself. That is before delivering me with her unexpected opinion that I had neither expected to hear, or for her to even think - ever.

"It's alright, Will. Now that I've met her, I actually don't mind Allie. It's probably because I don't hate you and she's half of you, but honestly, she's the first kid that I have spent time with who hasn't made me feel inclined to slice my own womb out afterwards."

In Sophie-language, her comment can almost be translated to praise of the highest order. It is almost like saying that she loved Allie way more than what she had expected to and that she couldn't wait to spend more time with her niece.

"Thanks Soph. I'm glad to hear it."

My sister briefly shares a smile with me before she snaps out of the moment and remembers why we are hovering by the front door together.

"Anyway, I'll let you get back to Bella. I'm going to be around for a few more days so we need to meet up again in that time! Just because you've got all of these new girls in your life now, doesn't mean that you should forget about your big sister, okay?"

I nod. Even though Sophie's comment is portrayed to be light-hearted and just a joke, I can sense that there is a little more depth and raw truth to her words about remembering her. I respond to this by pulling her into another hug, a comfort hug masked as a goodbye hug this time.

"Hey, you listen here, Soph. Just remember that even though I have three very beautiful girls in my life who I love in three completely different ways, you are always going to be the one who I loved first, okay?"

I think my words of reassurance are all that my sister needs, reciprocating my own actions and affirmations by squeezing me a little tighter.

"I love you little bro. It's just going to take a bit of getting used to seeing you being a family man, someone's dad."

"I know. But we'll all get there."

She gives me a nod before breaking away from my arms. "Bye Will."

Sophie and I part ways once again as she leaves the share house while I return to the lounge room, but I can't shake my happiness over my almost-prodigal sister returning to my life once again.

As Bella and I meet again in the middle of the room and for a proper greeting, Bella speaks up about my visitor once we are less distracted by one another's lips.

"That would have been a nice surprise for you having Sophie drop in. I find it hard to believe she spent time with Allie, though. Are you sure that she grasps the concept that she's your child?"

"Yeah. I think there's still hope for that sister of mine yet. Baby-steps..."

* * *

><p>So thoughts? With another character brought back (briefly), what's everyone's thoughts on Sophie? After four years, she's finally made a little bit of headway with accepting Allie. I hope you guys don't think that that is too out of character, but from my view of Sophie, I thought she would struggle with accepting Will settling down when she was so ambitious for him and when Bella and she didn't get on so well, I think that would just aggravate the situation. But that's just me. You?

****302 reviews for a brand new chapter!****

****Next chapter:**** ****The Hartley siblings realise just how alike they are, when Kyle and Bella warn each other of their dangerous courses; that obviously resemble their own...****

23. Damn Dan

****Thank you very much to all the reviews on the last chapter. I'm glad that the general consensus seemed to be that you thought that Sophie was kept quite in character (which is SO important, phew!) and that you enjoyed the Will/Allie/Sophie interactions. Also, thank you all who have made great or small contributions to this story reaching 300 reviews!****

****Wanted to squeeze in a quick (and well overdue!) review while I get through my monstrous to-do list I've got to get done before my BF & I head off to Sydney this weekend before I start my new job 2 days after I get back!****

****Enjoy x****

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty Three â€" Damn Dan

Bella's POV

It's getting late. Will and Allie had just left from my apartment about ten minutes ago, en-route home to the share house that my boyfriend and daughter currently share with our mutual friends.

Although I contemplate just going to bed and investing in an early night after a few regretfully later ones recently, I can't quite commit to the idea. I've always been a night owl. My tendency to stay up late than wake earlier has been ingrained within me from an early

age and I know it's definitely a family thing, a trait that my brother expresses also and a trait I fear that I can already see flourishing in my daughter and her sleeping patterns from time to time.

Across the room from me, where I am cleaning off the dining table and transporting dishes, my brother appears to be in the same position as myself as he hovers around my small kitchen, not too sure what to do and not too sure where to go from there.

"What are you up to now, Kyle?"

"No idea. I should probably just go to bed, but I'm not feeling overly enthusiastic for that idea. What about you?"

I laugh lightly, after I realise that I had hit the nail on the head regarding my thoughts on the current similarity between my brother and I, all the while, obliviously to him.

"Yeah.. I'm thinking the same thing as you. I should go to bed, but that idea is so not reaching out to me."

My brother smiles back immediately, replacing the look of mild confusion that hit his expression at the point when I started laughing randomly, without him being in on the joke.

"Do you feel like doing something together in that case? Make the most of the time that the ratbag isn't here?"

I nod and smile. Secretly, I think that the doting uncle doesn't let onto the fact that he enjoys his time at my place even more when Allie is around and when he is left to hang out with her, rather than when Allie is at her father's and he is just left with me.

Saying that, I also think that everyone -Will, Kyle and even myself- enjoys having a day or so without all of the boundaries that come with having a tot around the house. Movies can exceed the general audiences 'G' rating at any time of day. There is no consideration needed before blasting music, slamming doors or making noise, rather than tiptoeing around Allie's napping. And most enticingly, you don't have to backtrack your paths and ensure that there is absolutely nothing that you have left behind subconsciously which could be hazardous to my four year old in any way, shape or form. As much as I love my daughter, it is nice being able to live like a normal twenty-four year old when Will has her.

My brother and I meet up halfway, preparing to take seats on two of the three bar-stools that rotate to either view the beach view in the distance from the height of my apartment, or alternatively, you can look into the far less interesting kitchen from the island that is built on the outskirts and edge of the kitchen.

"So have you got any plans for tomorrow?" Kyle asks as he takes his seat, swiveling back and forth on the seat in 360° clockwise and anticlockwise motions. As a generalisation, I have noticed that every male and every child who sit on the bar-stool seats are all triggered to twist and turn back and forth on the seat for a while at least.

"Yeah" I reply succinctly, before sitting down on the furthest

bar-stool from Kyle, the closest to the wall and window with a stool in between us as I prepare to elaborate on my answer to his question and explain my plans to my older brother. "I actually have to go and see Daniel. He was helping Will and I at first with trying to treat Allie when we didn't know what was wrong with her, before we realised the mermaid connection. So, I need to go and explain what is happening about that to him and tell him that we don't really need his help anymore."

Kyle gives me a particularly questioning or judging look, furrowing his eyebrow just a little. "You're not Amish, Bella. You own a phone, so why couldn't you tell him that by phone...? Is Will keen on the idea of you two meeting up on your own? If I were him, I probably wouldn't be... Even as your brother, I'm not keen on the idea of you hanging out with your abusive ex."

"I guess I could've talked to him over the phone but he wanted to meet up as _friends..._ hear about Allie and all that. Just catch up, you know."

Kyle shrugs it off and without him even saying a word about it to me, I can tell he either doesn't especially like the idea or he doesn't exactly approve of it. As Kyle fails to reply in connection with the disapproval I can still see it written and expressed all over his face, so I attempt to change the subject and divert the conversation. "So what about you? What have you got planned for tomorrow?"

"I think that I'm just going to have a quiet day tomorrow... Veg out at home, sleep in until midday, watch movies... You know."

"Sounds awesome. I wish that I could join you..."

From the combination of Kyle's evidently lingering annoyance over my decision for tomorrow, as well as my conversation diversion that clearly hadn't been very well thought out to last for more than two minutes, our conversation falls into a lull of marginally uncomfortable silence between my brother and I. I quickly try to get our conversation up and running once again, but it doesn't take long for me to realise the mistake of my ways in the path of the conversation I am attempting to initiate.

"So are you enjoying living here on the Gold Coast? Do you think you'll stay longer? Even permanently? Allie would love her uncle being so close, instead of frolicking around the world."

"Oh of course... It would be purely for Allie's sake only, right? Nothing to do with her mother?"

Kyle gives me a smile once again, giving me the reassurance that the ice and chill of a few minutes ago seems to be thawing and defrosting between the two of us, so I return his smile before giving his question a reply.

"Of course..._ I_ couldn't care less if you lived here or not. It's all Allie, and I just want what makes her happy" I lie, something that doesn't need to be explained or clarified between either of us.

"Sure, sure, Bella. I know that you love me. Saying that, I have definitely been giving extending my stay some consideration. I'm

thinking about maybe staying for a year, six months... I mean sure, there's beaches, caf  s and everything else that the Gold Coast has to offer all over the world, but it's the people that are going to make it hard to leave."

I smile at my brother's explanation of considering staying here, in the same city, let alone the same country as me for a while longer, which I really cannot be happier at the prospect of.

"So the people, hey? Allie and I can't take all the credit for that one. Who else have you liked and enjoyed their company here?"

"Well it's been really great seeing Will again - I've always gotten along well with him. Cleo and Lewis are nice enough, but not quite my cup of tea or personal preference since they're a touch on the conservative side. But, it's been really great hanging out with Tam and Rikki."

The smile that erupts on my brother's face at the thought of the last woman who he mentions doesn't go unnoticed to me. Instead, Kyle's automatic smile at the mention of my friend, my married friend, sends all sorts of warning and alarm bells to go berserk within me.

There has been one or two moments in the past that had triggered a similar warning for me, but I had managed to suppress and set aside the momentary worry at the chemistry between one of my best friends and my brother. Now, it is not so easy. I've seen my brother with his girlfriend's, his crushes and the girl's he has been involved with for all of my life. The problem is that every event when there would be a romantic interest in Kyle's life has been feeling like a replication of his interactions and vibe around Rikki. The same can be said for Rikki. Her smiles, her interactions with Kyle almost mirrored aspects of her relationship and romance with Zane.

As Rikki's friend and as Kyle's sister, I feel that it is my duty to at least sound out a warning, an alert of what may come if either party don't recognise the blurred lines and grey area that I can see both of them entering into from my perspective as an outsider. The problem is that I don't know exactly how popular my warning is going to make me.

"Kyle, I feel like you are getting too close to Rikki... She's married and I don't want either of you to do something you'll regret."

"Yeah? I'm getting too close to Rikki, am I? And how is Dan going, Bella?"

"Oh, get stuffed."

Kyle stands up from his seat at the bar-stool and points a hand at me. I can see the annoyance in his body language, his eyes and his reaction to my suggestion.

"Come on Bella! It's a bit hypocritical of you to have a go at me, warning me not to cheat when you're the one going out to see Daniel - your ex, alone, without Will knowing! I really don't think that leaves you in any sort of position to insinuate that there is anything aside from friendship going on between Rikki and I!"

I instantly become offended over the accusations of a similar nature that I had given my brother are reciprocated and returned regarding myself and my former boyfriend.

"Will is fine with me seeing Daniel! He's been with us, he knows that I'm with him and there's been absolutely no romance, no lingering feelings, no-nothing between Dan and I. But unlike us, you and Rikki are always snuggling up and all over each other. Sure you don't kiss or anything, but you can't keep your hands off each other! You're so affectionate that you two could be mistaken for a couple."

"Whatever, Bella! Tell yourself whatever you need to help you sleep at night, but you know that love never really dies completely. Otherwise, how else do you explain hooking up with Will again?"

I roll my eyes and stand up just as Kyle had a few minutes earlier. "We were obviously supposed to work things out again! Don't try and bring me down to your level. I've done nothing wrong! I wasn't with Will when I got together with Dan and I wasn't with Dan when Will and I got back together! Sure, Zane's not around right now, but Rikki's married!"

"Say what you want, but don't come crying to me after I told you so, Bella!"

I give my brother a clear eye roll to translate my total annoyance at him.

"Whatever. Right back at you. I'm going to bed" I call out sharply before entering and shutting off my bedroom from the rest of the house with a slam of the wooden door.

Although I had shut (well, slammed) Kyle out of my life for the rest of the night, my brother's words and his own warnings to me don't go unforgotten by any means. I didn't just roll my eyes, walk out and forget them. I toss and turn all night pondering over his words. I try to determine whether I have been justifying my own actions and contact with Daniel, like Rikki and Kyle are, whether my perception and my actions are in sync, or whether I have been trying to block out the fact that I am slowly falling into my own trap of the same oblivion as my brother is!

* * *

><p>The following day, I get up and get ready reasonably early, hoping to be a passing ship and avoid my brother. I haven't spoken to Kyle at all since I stormed out of our argument last night and I feel as though the issue is still a little too raw and fresh to deal with just yet.<p>

Consequently, I am lucky that Kyle stuck to his word about his chill-out-at-home day and by the time that I walk out the door to head for Daniel's, I can still hear him sleeping.

Although Daniel has moved a little closer to Tweed Heads and Coolangatta just over the New South Wales side of the NSW/Queensland border, the drive still doesn't take too long, nor does it feel too tedious.

Eventually I arrive at my unfamiliar destination, and locate the house I am looking for in amongst the scattered residential beach-side homes.

As I knock on the door and wait for the householder to answer whom is expecting my arrival, I look over my shoulder behind me and note the darkening skies and the eeriness that appears to be warning of the impending storm. Earlier in the morning, I had noticed a warning of a storm on the local news site on my phone. However, as most locals would, I had ignored the warning earlier. Warnings of 'strong winds' and 'warning weather' are almost a regular occurrence, as are the wrong forecasts when in actual fact, the weather expected is rarely delivered.

However, seeing the dark and cloudy skies that are coming across the water, from out at sea today, I begin to second-guess my decision. Just as much as I am second-guessing my decision to be here in the first place.

"Hey Bella" Daniel greets with a smile as soon as he opens the door to me. "Come on in."

Hesitantly, I walk past my ex-boyfriend as he holds the door open to me, while I immediately scan my new surroundings that bear a whole lot more familiarity than what I had been expecting. I notice old photos of Dan's deceased son proudly on display around the house; the same photos that he had always insisted on hiding away - out of sight, out of mind when we lived together.

Additionally, I notice pieces of furniture that had been in the old apartment that held a whole lot of memories, ending with Dan almost taking his own life. Along with the photos of my ex-boyfriend's son, my eye is caught to photos of my own daughter and myself, as well as a few old pieces of amateur artwork that Allie had made for the man that she had been raised to believe was her father for the first year of her life.

"I like what you've done with your place in here. It looks nice" I commend politely, with a lie. The old photos and memories translate to a creepiness, almost the feeling of resembling a shrine.

Crossing my arms in front of myself, I begin to walk around aimlessly, examining the house to make it look like I am not as uncomfortable as I feel in the beyond awkward situation.

"Thanks Bella" Can I get you a drink or something?"

I shake my head to gesture my answer before I speak it aloud. "No thanks, Dan. I'm fine."

"Alright" Dan replies where a silence ensues before he speaks up once again. "So how's Allie? Is she better?"

"That's actually what I came to talk to you about" Listen, thank you so much for all your help with Allie's sickness and for everything, but you can stop the searches and information you said you've been trying to get on her sickness. Will and I appreciate your efforts tremendously, but we've already found an answer to the problem."

Dan looks a little disappointed initially, before his lips transform into a smile. "It's been a pleasure. I've been glad to see you both you and Allie againâ€¦ And more importantly that you've let me see you both again. I wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't. So is little Allie's better? What was the issue?"

"It's a very long and complicated issue, and it's probably going to be quite the ongoing problem, but you know how I had my powers in connection to being a mermaid? Basically Allie's getting her own set and they are a lot stronger than we were expecting."

Before Daniel has a chance to reply, I see the opening for an outer. The escape that I have been looking for in the mess I have gotten myself into, the mess of old feelings, hindsight and my guilt of being here, with my ex-boyfriend, alone, and without my boyfriend's knowledge. It is my own fault and I know that I entered into the mess the exact moment that I agreed to meet up with Dan, instead of just explaining things over the phone.

"Soâ€¦ I guess I should head off. I really should have just told you over the phone, sorry for the inconvenience."

"Don't be sorry. It was really good to see you. I don't get many visitors these days."

The smile that precedes Daniel's honest statements brings me right on back to four years ago. It's the first genuine smile I had seen from my ex-boyfriend in such a long time, not since things started to go downhill in Dan's life, which brought our relationship down with it.

However, that one smile is just enough to bring back my memories, my fondness for some of the best times that I had spent with him in the past, before his personal issues intensified, before he self-destructed and before I had to face his dark side and the abuse that came with that.

"Bye Danâ€¦ I really should leave before the weather gets any worse."

Just as I began to walk off and leave the house, Daniel latches onto my wrist and pulls me back towards him in one swift, heavily choreographed and extremely cheesy move that you would expect to see in films and TV series'. As he pulls me back to keep me from walking away and leaving him, he uses just enough force for me to face him, but with not enough strength to hurt me.

"Stayâ€¦ The weather is bad. One gust of wind could rip the hinges off my front door, your car doorâ€¦ I want you here. Just stay, here" his face moves closer and closer to mine. I can feel the gentle, warm tingle of his breath as his head closes in on mine and I can see his intent focus, directed on my lips.

"Stay with __me__, Bella."

I know there is more to Daniel's invitation than just a place to wait out the storm...

* * *

><p>So, thoughts? While Bella and Kyle can see the warning for each other, they are a little bit more stubborn about themselves. All I can say that at least one sibling will be very right about the other. I'd love to know your predictions about how you all think that the next few chapter will transpire. Only a few chapters left, but so much left to happen!**

Next chapter: Storms are brewing -literally and figuratively- as Rikki heads down the path of a dangerous downward spiral.

317 reviews for the next installment!

24. Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves

Hey **there! I hoped to have this up a week or so ago, but I just couldn't find time with being interstate, starting my new job and the new semester of my studies starting.**

Thank you to all who read & reviewed the last chapter. I did my best to reply to all who connected an account to their name :)

Now, in reply to 'Guest' on the last chapter. I really apologise if you are unhappy with the fact that I ask for a certain amount of reviews each chapter. I spend a lot of time and put a lot of effort into posting around 4,000-word chapters. Beyond writing them, I also spend so much time in thinking about and planning each chapter. I only ask for a certain number reviews to be able to get feedback, to see what people like/don't like and to motivate me when I struggle with to my stats, on average nearly 400 people read each chapter and I might ask for 15 reviews at the most. I also determine the amount based on how many reviews I get roughly on the latest chapters, so it's not like I'm asking for 30 new people to start reviewing each chapter; it's not unrealistic. I really do apologise if you dislike the idea, but in my opinion, asking for a little feedback is a small ask from my readers to help me, my story and my skills.

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty Four â€" Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves

Rikki's POV

Every day it is getting harder and harder for me to wake up from my slumber and pull myself out of my lonely bed. Today is no different.

I feel tired and sluggish.

Fortunately, my 'stonefish' exterior (Lewis's words, not mine) has been supporting my demeanor of late, helping me be able to plough through and soldier on with my life despite the fact that my new husband has been arrested and my sister has only just been released from hospital after her hidden eating disorder reached breaking point days ago.

However, despite my hard-as-nails disposition I can tell and I can

feel the toll that bottling my own issues up is taking on my inner self which has rarely reached the surface of late.

Slowly but surely I exercise all the effort I need to pull myself up and get out of bed, just like I have every other day this week.

Walking downstairs, I get the feeling and similar sensation that has visited me in recent times; loneliness.

Ironically, I still live with two, sometimes three (depending on which parent Allie is staying with for that day) other people. Despite rhyme and despite reason, loneliness is still one of the greatest, hardest and one of the most overwhelming things that I have felt throughout the recent ordeals that my husband and sister have both individually been in the firing line for.

Perhaps it is just as simple as not having Zane around the house, not having that different sort of company on a romantic and more intimate level. However, I have this feeling entrenched deep within me that that is not all and that the loneliness is not simply founded on having lost Zane unexpectedly for the last few months.

Everything is changing. Could that be part of the reason too? Anyone's guess is as good as mine.

â€| Over the last few months, Cleo and Lewis have been preoccupied and wrapped up in their own little family, which is completely reasonable. However, it does feel like one door is being opened to welcome their new family member, another is unintentionally being shut to the time they used to spend with their friends.

Will and Bella are a similar story too, since rekindling their former relationship from many years ago, one of my other best friends and her boyfriend, my house mate, have undoubtedly been residing and floating in their own little cocoon with their daughter. Again, this is completely reasonable and I have no blame for either of them, or for Cleo and Lewis as they both similarly establish and navigate the new playing fields they are on with their own families, factoring in the significantly stronger involvement required in the changes in their lives.

Emma too has returned home. That in itself is a change. Finding the words to describe the feeling of having my friend living in the same country and not having seas or miles and miles and land between us is truly difficult to do. Really, it's just one of those things that you don't know what you've got until it's gone, and then you cherish it more than ever if you're fortunate enough to get it back. However, as great as it has been having Emma home, it is almost superficial in many senses. As she landed back in the country; she landed right on the top of everyone's livesâ€| She doesn't know all the details and all the problems and the nitty gritty of what has been lying beneath the stagnant surface, where all our problems are. All Emma knows is the important developments and changes we have kept her up to date on. Aside from that and with everyone's exterior smiles, things would appear to have barely changed since she visited us all last.

Finally, we have my own flesh and blood and the man I am legally bound to. Both Tam and Zane are going through these monumental issues

in their lives at the momentâ€¦ But neither of them wants to let me in.

It's heartbreaking, it's enraging and it's completely confusing when you want to be there for your loved ones and help them fight some of the greatest battles of their lives, but they won't let you. Worst of all, I don't understand why.

â€¦ Do they think that I'm not supportive enough? That I won't be there for them and that I'll let them down? When times get tough, do neither of them truly want me in their lives? Is it just embarrassment? Do they not think that I'll be able to deal or cope with their problems too? Do they think that I don't care and that it hasn't affected me at all being shunned from helping them with their problems? The hundreds of unanswered questions that have been brewing within my mind are enough to drive anyone insane; being trapped within your own thoughts.

Tam has softened a little, letting me in to the point of us vowing to be honest and upfront with each other, but it still crushes me the second that I remember how she has been enduring her bulimia and her eating disorder for goodness knows how many months and not once did she go to me. Not once did she want me to be there for her. Although I knew something wasn't right with her for a while now, I was completely oblivious to her struggles and the extent of those struggles until she reached breaking point, just days ago when she was unable to hide it any longer, when the choice was ripped from her hands and she was forced to let me in.

Zane, too. His imprisonment and his assault charges are an issue that we haven't even discussed. Aside from seeing him before he shut me out, telling me to stay away and move on until he gets out, all of my attempts to visit him have gone unfruitful and he has still refused all of my attempts to visit, call and write to him since he began his prison sentence in the turn of events that developed within hours.

As much as I don't want to admit it to anyone, let alone myself, I need to be needed. I need to have someone anchor me; just provide that little bit of stability through their turbulence within mine and my friends lives and the stormy changes and conditions that go with that. I just need that anchor, that person to be there for me, to tell me that I can do it and that I can get through the storm with everyone else, to help me be sure before I'm off on my merry own and independent way once again, rocking my own boat like Jessica Watsonâ€¦

* * *

><p>Normally, asking me to choose between any of my best friends and to distinguish one from the other is an impossible mission; like choosing between chalk and cheese. Each girl has their own strengths, their own weakness, their own reliabilities and their own things they fall short on.<p>

Today, however, is a different story. Almost without even considering the question, I know the answer to needing to talk, filling the void of loneliness and knowing which of my friends is the best fit for the job.

Bella is easy. She's a born conversationalist. She'll ask questions to get what I need to vent and get off my chest, but I'll be able to do so in a subtle and conversational manner. As much as I love Cleo, she has been incapable of constructing sentences unless they feature the word 'baby' in them which is so far from what I need right now and while I know I would get a good conversation from Emma, I know how quickly her suspicions can be ignited and I really do not want anything other than a light, simple chat to fill that void of loneliness and just therapeutically talk.

Instantly, I find myself en-route to a spontaneous trip to Bella's apartment for what I am hoping would only seem like a coffee and chat, but really fulfill what I crave, what I need on many other levels than that.

All I want and all that I need is to talk. To feel something other than the inescapable loneliness I am trapped with at present. Even if Bella can't be my anchor, even if she can't read the depth of my own problems and the toll that both Tam and Zane's are having on me, I really don't mind. In a way, I don't even want her to be able to. But, I just need her to be that someone and something for a little while that gives me the recharge I need to keep fighting on and keeping manning my own storm-ridden ship through the dark, turbulent seas called my life.

As I get in my car, heading for the place I can almost navigate my way to in my sleep, the radio turns on automatically with the car being turned on.

"_expecting turbulent storms and hazardous winds. Stay inside!"_

I sneak a glance out of the windows to the clear skies and only marginal wind around; not the apocalypse that seems to be warned of today.

Living on the Gold Coast, warning such as this, are frequent. So much so that you don't think anything of it when yet another false warning gets broadcast on the newsreaders and Bureau's weekly 'off days'.

It's just another warning. I turn the radio off without another thought.

* * *

><p>I approach the door and knock on my friend's apartment, number 33, which I have visited countless times before now.<p>

As the door swings open welcomingly, however, I get a different result from every other time that I have done the same action, on the same door. A male with a strong resemblance to my friend -the apartment-owner- answers the door instead.

"Hey Kyle, is your sister home?"

"Nah. Bella went out a while ago. Do you want to come in?" I look past Kyle's shoulder and I can hear the TV playing further in the background; repeating the same warning that I had ignored minutes earlier. "Sure. I'll just wait out the storm here."

"Can I get you a drink or something? Coffee? Tea?" there's a pause as a smirking, playful smile that I am becoming very familiar with spreads across Kyle's lips. "... Or a wine?"

I laugh at the inappropriate beverage suggestion for 3 o'clock in the afternoon, on a weekday. "I think I need the wine, but I'll just take a coffee... With a straw. Thanks Kyle."

I hear some sort of noise from the kitchen that represents Kyle's acknowledgement of my request, as I move further from the entrance, kitchen and dining area of my friend's apartment until I reach the living area and crash comfortably on the lounge, my home away from home.

I mold my body into a position on what could be a very competitive candidate for the world's most comfortable couch before I hear a flick of the kettle as it begins to heat with an escalating temperature to reach its boiling point.

"I can do that for you if you want Kyleâ€¦ It's way faster for me and Bella's kettle is heinously slow."

"Oh yes please... That would be great. I've seen Bels', but I'd love to see what your powers are like in action anyway."

As I realise the implications of what I just offered to Kyle, I instantly regret my decision to offer to aid his beverage-making by heating the water, which means having to get off of the couch and separate myself from the comfortable position I am content in.

Eventually, I manage to extract myself and pull away from my magnetic attraction to the couch before I walk towards the kitchen where Kyle is preparing two mugs, minus the boiling water. A few metres away from Kyle, the kettle that is sitting on the bench begins to bubble and boil instantly after I clench my fingers into a fist as I control the exertion of just enough power to heat the water.

"That's so coolâ€¦"

I smile. It's been a while since I've seen the same reaction as Kyle's. My powers are old news to my friend's who have known about them for years now. Even though Kyle isn't completely new to mermaid magic from knowing about Bella and Allie, it is still the first time he has seen mine and there is that awe and admiration; that moment of seeing the eye-opening new experience of power.

"Thanks" I smile in response. Once the kettle's water has reached boiling water, I transfer my concentration of what I am heating, moving my control over to the other person in the room and substantially reducing the power that I exert. I try to heat, just enough to warm Kyle's bare toes, and then move to his head, using only enough heat to cause a few small sweat droplets to form above his dark eyebrows.

It's the sort of stunt that I would never have dared to try on a person five or so years ago when our powers were so temperamental and out of control. However, now that we are the ones in control of the powers, not the other way around, I've used my power to heat people

numerous time before and almost every night in winter I would do so to silence Zane's: "_Rikki, I'm cold._." grumbles.

"Freaking hell... That is _awesome_..."

Kyle's eyes are a giveaway for expressing his wonder at the sensation I am in control of him feeling.

I smile and relinquish the power that I am using to mildly warm parts of Kyle's body. As soon as the effects of the warmth have worn off, Kyle goes back to making the hot drinks, grabbing one of the hundred straws that Bella has stocked up on for herself and Allie.

We each take one of the beverages after they have been prepared and subconsciously walk over to the six-seater dining table without another word to one another.

"Do you want to pretend that I'm Bella?" Kyle suddenly asks me, without any further explanation to allow me to understand what the question means or where it is coming from.

"What do you mean?" I reply as I take a sip from the straw of my hot drink that is probably a little too hot. As much as I love my power allocated -undoubtedly allocated to my fiery personality- its times like this when my friend and fellow mermaid, Emma's, power would come in handy way more.

Kyle adjusts his posture and position in his seat at the table, moving a little closer towards myself, signalling and trying to reassure me that he can be a trusting confidant.

"Rikki, I'm not blind. I can tell that you are struggling. I can see that you're floundering just to stay afloatâ€¦ I've seen you trying to be there for and being strong for your sister and your husband, but no one is there for you. You can talk to me; I'll try to help you."

I don't let it show, but just the mention of both my husband and my sister fuels a storm of heartbreak and hurt. I barely even understand either of their reasons why they felt as though they had to exclude me from their lives, through issues that I want to be there and support them through more than ever.

Instead of letting Kyle in and being honest, I roll my eyes and begin to activate the flight part of my fight or flight response. However, I am stopped in my tracks when an interruption pauses my plan to get up and depart from the table and, even more so, the situation that I can't deal with.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Kyleâ€¦ I'm fine, really. I don't need anyone, I never have."

Instantly, Kyle grabs my hand and I am stopped from walking away from the table when really, I am being stopped from walking away from the problems that I can't deal with. The problems that I don't know _how_ to deal withâ€¦

"Rikkiâ€¦ Everyone '_needs'_ someone... I can be that person for you."

No further words are spoken while Kyle holds onto my wrist gently, but with enough of an attachment to prevent me from just storming off and fleeing from what I don't want to face. We look each other straight, directly and square in the eyes. I look back equally as directly in our eye-lock to see who would give in and succumb first to a blink or forfeit.

Neither of us flinch, nor move a muscle. For a very long time.

However, eventually, when the slight pull of Kyle's hand on my arm is enough to get me to return, sit back down and give in, no one is more surprised than me, but I guess that everyone has their threshold.

"Alright. Change of plans. You need to vent. Let's scrap the hot drinks and I'll get you something heavy if you need the edge to let it out."

I laugh lightly because at this stage, the only options are to either laugh or to cry. It hurts me sitting down and it hurts me having to succumb, having to give in when one of my points of personal pride has been my capabilities of being independent. In the past, I've never needed anyone, or anything.

"What's so funny?" Kyle asks seriously as he gets up, grabbing a bottle of vodka that is shelved in a cupboard which is far from and out of his four-year-old nieces reach and access in the kitchen.

"It's hilarious how pathetic that I have become. A few years ago, even when my dad died, I never needed anyone. Who am I? Now I'm at breaking point because it's just getting so hard Kyle. Either issue would be hard enough, but I need Zane's support with Tam's eating disorder and I need Tam's support with Zane's arrest. Seriously who is this person that needs others?!"

"You might be incredible, but you're still human."

By the time I finish speaking, there is this desperation and rawness as I am finally pushed to breaking point, after weeks of trying to claw my way to stop before I reach the edge of it all. I can feel my exterior beginning to crack, in addition to my will to be independent and self-reliant that had already broken. My throat hurts and my eyes struggle to contain the canyon of tears that are fighting to flow freely.

Kyle lets go of my hand, leaving his seat as he shrinks just a little, crouching below my chair at the table and at the perfect height for me to rest my head on his shoulder as he envelops me in a hug that is more comforting and more supportive than what I would like to acknowledge and realise.

"I should go." I eventually manage to choke out, finding enough strength to pull away from the arms of my best friend's brother and try to go out on my own again.

Standing up, I begin to walk over to my handbag that I dropped in one of the corners earlier in the day as I notice the light, but consistent rainfall pouring down outside. It really does not look as

though it will begin to ease up or lighten any time soonâ€¦ Just like the warnings that I had been too blasÃ© to listen to earlier in the day.

"Well that is just fantastic. It's bucketing down out there. I didn't take the warnings this morning too seriously..."

Kyle stands up from his previous crouch as he comes over and stands beside me as we both look outside to the rain. According to the reports that -which as a local you get way too used to ignoring- were suggesting that rain and wind is expected to ruin the beaches and cause flooding in other areas like the maze of canals in the midst of the Gold Coast's landscape and geography.

"I was kind of wondering why you came over in this weather and why neither you nor Bella listened to the reports and all those warnings this morningâ€¦"

"Here, you get so used to hearing of winds or rain like that, but only 15% or so of the time will it ever be delivered. If we listened to every report, we'd only get out of the house every couple of weeks."

"We can hang out. Watch a movie. There's no way I'm letting you go out and risk getting drenched and beached as a mermaid in that horrendous weather. You don't have to be anywhere, do you?"

I shake my head and Kyle claps his hands together with a smile.

"Great. I'll raid Bella's secret stash of munchies. You pick a movie."

After five or so minutes Kyle and I regroup to watch the movie together.

He drops the over-sized bowl of popcorn on the table, along with a small bowl of _Mars Bar Pods_ and two single serving shot glasses of _Smirnoff_.

As Kyle drops to the lounge carelessly, I calculate the distance between us which is undoubtedly bordering on a little too close. But neither of us move.

I turn my head just a little, enough to look at Kyle as we look between each other and I feel a little shiver down my spine. A shiver of thrill, not fear. He sends me a small smile and I reciprocate it as we read each other wordlessly.

Although by now both Kyle and I know each other well, probably better and closer than we should be, it doesn't take a class in body language or a mountain of knowledge on the other person to understand what is happening as both he and I slowly, almost unnoticeably begin to close the distance between each other even more as our heads and our lips grow nearer and nearer.

The moment is slow, but it feels intense, electric, as my heart pounds trying to stop myself and work out who is initiating more. The movie, the popcorn, the munchies are all instantaneously forgotten about.

That moment is like an eye-opener. I suddenly see all the instances, all the times in the past that I should have used as a warning. All of the times, that as a married woman, I should have backed off and extinguished the smoldering and the smaller sparks between myself and Kyle.

The thing is what I know more than anything is that if I don't stop myself right this second as Kyle and I near closer and closer together, I know very well what will happen next...

* * *

><p>So. Now Bella & Daniel and Kyle & Rikki are all in compromising positions, but which couple will succumb? And, what will it mean for their relationships with Will and Zane? I'd love your thoughts and theories as always!

333 reviews until the next chapter.

**Next chapter: Lewis & Cleo discuss their future, while karma is turned back on Cleo. **

25. From Here On

**It's always pretty busy for me, but this last month has pretty much been the busiest month of my life. But, fortunately things have just started slowing down again and I wanted to get this up at the first opportunity possible. **

Did anyone see Indiana's appearance on House Husbands? I don't watch the show, but I did see a snippet of her on it. Can I just say she looks _way_ too young to have like an 8 year old daughter as she did on that show!

**Also, any Home & Away watchers on here?! I visited Palm Beach recently and caught some filming + big spoilers. About 15 cast members were there!
>

Enjoy x

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty Five " From Here On

Lewis's POV

The impending birth of Cleo and I's first child resembles a ticking time bomb a little. Ours is a ticking time bomb that we know about, but without a countdown since we have no clue as to how long is left, nor when it will go off. Mind you, in saying that, _our_ 'ticking time bomb' is a lot more positive than being blown up into smithereens. However, our situation and the timing is still nonetheless just as unknown with just as major repercussions when d-day finally comes.

In preparation for the impending delivery, my heavily pregnant wife and I had decided earlier to set aside today for a final day date

before our world will be thrown off its axis when the new addition to our family lands his or herself in our life. We have already made plans for the day which are set to take place; beginning with a quiet breakfast for two before selecting the final pieces of baby things that are still needed beyond what Bella has already given us from Allie and what Cleo had received from our friend's at the baby shower.

We begin our day at one of the coast's dining establishments, for a ridiculously nutritious breakfast to cater for Cleo's ravishing cravings.

"So. What is on the list?"

"What list?"

I roll my eyes and take a sip of my breakfast juice. "Come on Cleo. I know you've got a little list stashed away there somewhere. I guess that I can't blame you though. You have been under the influence of Emma for way too many years."

I expect and deserve the playful shove in my arm that my wife does not fail to deal out. Besides, a shove is great. Seriously, I'm grateful for any retaliation from Cleo nowadays, in contrast to the forms of retaliation that I would receive through some of her most hormonal and emotional periods of her pregnancy. Those times made for some pretty low points over the last few months. She has been known to burst into tears over the breakfast cereal being finished and one evening she didn't want to talk to me or even look at me for an entire night after I had accidentally stepped on, and assumedly killed, a snail which therefore completely upset her.

However, this morning is a different story. All breakfast cereal is out of our control and focus and there are no deceased snails, or waterworks in sight.

"Well I do have a little bit of a list... Since we got a lot of the big stuff like that cot, change table and highchair from Bella slash Allie, all that is really left for us to get is a car seat and pram, as well as a few bits just like a bedding and linen for the baby's cot. Clothes are a big no-no. We've got enough clothes to have triplets and give them new outfits every hour."

I nod, acknowledging my wife's overview of the inventory that I am sure she has compiled on what we already have to prepare for our new addition.

"Are you alright?" I ask my wife since it seems like Cleo had been about to add onto her explanation just seconds ago, as she shuffles in her seat, appearing to be evidently experiencing discomfort. Especially since we have no real time to expect our baby aside from knowing it will be sometime of over the next few weeks, I have been especially easy to trigger and alarm of late.

"I'm pretty sure that my waters just broke..."

Cleo looks nowhere near as panicked, nor does it feel like she jumps into the same rush that I do after hearing those words. I never expected her to be the calmer one in this scenario!

To be quite honest, I am thrown into such a tizz that I don't even think anything of the fact that there are absolutely no sound effects that coincide with what my wife just told me, as well as failing to question her lack of tail growth from the liquid.

"Really?! Here?! Are you serious?" I shriek hysterically in a lower tone.

My wifes face lights up as she relaxes in her seat, framing me as the fool of her light-hearted practical joke that I would have expected from Cleo's friends, but not from my wife so much.

"No, not really. It was just a twinge... Braxton Hicks or something but it was so worth it to see your face and your panic."

I huff in humiliation, making my disapproval at the wife who called wolf evident.

"Aww come on... It's not every day that you have the chance to prank people like that! Besides, there has got to be some upsides to being heavily pregnant!"

I can't blame her for making the most of her not-so pleasant situation and making light out of it while it lasts. However, if she'd let the joke go on until I'd freaked out and began to prepare for the unrealistic situation of her having and me requiring to deliver the baby right then and right there, then I would not be feeling so compassionate.

"Fine. I'll let that one pass, but if you think that you can get away with it again, then I have five words for you... the boy who cried wolf."

"Sorry..." Cleo smiles with an expression that catches her lie out since she looks pretty much anything but sorry for her actions, pressing a kiss to my cheek to grant herself the forgiveness that she is obviously oblivious to having automatically received from me. "How much longer do you bet that I have left anyway?"

I think about the question that my wife has just posed to me as I let out a sigh. Not from unhappiness or any other negative emotion that could be derived from a sigh, but just out of my realisation of the enormity of her question. The answer and my own estimate of it has to be based on so many unpredictable factors... The pregnancy hadn't been planned and it hadn't been confirmed at any point so as to how far into the pregnancy she was when we had even learned of it.

All that we know is that we've known for about 7 and a half months since we holidayed in Sydney with our friends and that pregnancies seldom last longer than the nine months gestation.

"I honestly have no idea Cleo. At a guess, I have a feeling it might come in around two weeks, a fortnight or so. What about you?"

"Who said I have any clue? I was just hoping that my brainy, genius husband would have answer for me so that I can have a time to prepare for!"

I laugh at Cleo's exclamation and her different attitude on what we are both as clueless as each other about.

Shortly after, it doesn't take long before the two of us fall into a silence that is anything but uncomfortable for the two of us. As much as some of the fun times and the good times are great, I feel like sometimes the happy silences are sorely underrated high points in a relationship. Those are the times that you forget to appreciate being able to just sit there, be in the person whom you love's company and just truly absorb life as a spectator while it feels like your own world is standing still. Times like this where you can just sit there and feel so comfortable and just content gets overlooked.

These time are the ones that I truly began to open my eyes to and appreciate when I had my medical turn with the Guillain Barre Syndrome just a few years ago. I missed times like this when I was healthy and when I could enjoy happiness and contentment with seldom appreciated drama-free moments. Even while I was recovering and in remission from the horrible disease, moments like this came to be some of my favourite when we could just sit there and enjoy our lives contently, with no huge problems right there in front of us.

"Where can you see us headed? What lies in our future?" Cleo asks me the deep and unexpected question that I am a little surprised to hear this early in the morning.

"Wow. Where did that come from? Being completely honest with you, in our future, I can see us headed to buy some baby stuff. A pram, maybe some decorations."

I am the recipient of another light playful shove from my wife, although she can't hide her amusement and goofy smile from my predictable answer to her.

"Lewis! It's a serious question! We need to talk about stuff like this. So, I'll ask again. Where can you see us headed in the future? Otherwise, we'll end up with one of us still living with my family, wanting a hundred kids and a hippie unemployed life on the dole while the other is planning to move to Luxembourg and focus on our careers!"

I laugh at my wife who could be caught out on the terms of exaggeration.

"Cause that all sounds very likely - very reflective of the type of people we both are, doesn't it?" I reply sarcastically as Cleo just nods with a big, overdone grin just to keep with the unrealistic theme of this topic.

"Seriously though" I continue speaking, beginning to answer the question that Cleo has just raised, the question that I had mocked and the question that she has then exaggerated on. "I think the next big thing for us to work towards is moving out of your family's house. It's done us well, especially while we had my medical costs and while I was recovering from the GBS and it'll be handy having extra babysitters for a while, but really, we can't live with your dad and Sam forever, Cleo."

The tone and vibe of our discussion becomes decreasingly less humorous after my 'real answer' and Cleo's nod of acknowledgment that goes with it.

"That's true, especially with a baby and a family of our own, moving out and renting a place is something that we should probably look into."

I nod in agreement with my wife as I sweep up her hand and give it a squeeze of reassurance as I deliver the reality-check side of the prospect if our plan to move out in the near future does come to fruition.

"It's going to mean tight budgets again, but at least we will be a little more prepared and hopefully a little less complacent this time around if we give moving out a shot..."

* * *

><p>After arriving home, we are finally able to begin to set our bedroom up for our new occupant. The re-decorating of our room is a big improvement on the bags of baby clothes and two big pieces of under-furnished, naked furniture sitting in the room as it has been since we'd received it from our friend a few weeks ago.<p>

Now, I am left to build and construct the impossible pram while Cleo happily alternates between doing the easier stuff; like folding baby clothes and browsing baby name books. All the while, honestly, knowing that I am building it, I really feel as though the safety of the pram is questionable.

"Alice? Angus? Anton?"

Cleo begins listing names in alphabetical order as she comes across them in her baby book that she has been treating as a Bible.

Finally, after what felt like decades, we finally reached the final letter, still absolutely no further than we were before when it comes to deciding a name for the person who has had the completely original working title of 'Baby McCartney' lately.

"Zane #2? Zara? Zeus? Zoe?"

"Man, baby-naming is painful. I can see why Bella didn't delve any deeper into the alphabet by sticking with the A's for naming Allie!"

Cleo laughs at my statement, even though, knowing Bella, I have no doubt in the fact that she would have thoroughly examined every single baby names book that she could get her hands on, with a fine tooth comb _before_ naming her daughter Adelaide, who we all know better as Allie now.

"I have an idea, Lewis" Cleo exclaims with one of her bright, wide smiles that I absolutely love to bits. "To narrow the amount of names down, we should just look through names with the first letter of our name. So for boy's names we just look in the L's and girl's names, C's."

I smile, partly because I like the idea that it means less delving through baby name books where every name you hear and see begins to warp together, sounding and looking the same which means it is harder to find a clear distinction behind names you like and names you can't

stand. Additionally, Cleo's proposition works perfectly for me since it would support a name that I had shortlisted and especially liked earlier in her pregnancy.

"That sounds kind of sweet, Cleo... Not to mention easier! I think that I like that idea."

"Good" she smiles, as a one word confirmation that her plan is more than likely set to be implemented. Once this is set, she reverts back to her baby name book that is still open in her hand after concluding her examination and hunt for names for our child through the alphabet. "So... C's and L's then..."

I watch as Cleo flips back to the front of the book, locating the two letters that we just had agreed on. However, at the same time, I notice how she repositions herself in her seated position multiple times in an evident and agitated state.

"I just can't get comfortable! My back is killing" Cleo growls unhappily as she continues to wiggle and wriggle and jiggle with something inside her.

I have noticed Cleo's discomfort and unsettled movements several times since we have begun our infant-related tasks in our room. Initially I didn't think anything of her discomfort. It's really not uncommon this late in the pregnancy and when I'm used to sharing a bed with a heavily pregnant woman, you come to know of all of the movement, discomfort and changes that she goes through while you're both unsuccessfully trying to sleep.

"Cleo? What sort of pain are you getting in your back?"

"Shooting pain. It's just darting all around my back. Freaking Braxton Hicks... Cause just as much trouble as the Braxton brothers" she answers, wriggling and sighing a little more, as if to add more credibility to her claims of pain and discomfort that I don't need any aiding or additional help to believe. "And junior's going a little wild. It feels like there's a rave party going on in there. In case back pain isn't great enough, let's bruise mother's stomach too."

I laugh lightly, considering the prank my wife had successfully pulled on me earlier this morning as I realise that her pain may mean that her prank is a little less fictitious than what she had thought; that karma just may be rebounding right back in her direction if my suspicions are right.

"Cleo... I'm no prenatal expert, so I can't guarantee anything or confirm it, but by the sounds of what you're describing, I'm wondering if there's a chance that that's not just Braxton Hicks... I think that what you're feeling might be the early onset of labour pains."

The look on Cleo's face quickly transitions to shell-shocked horror, before her hysterical reaction follows it.

"What?! No! I'm not ready! We're not ready! You haven't even finished building all of the baby's stuff! The baby's not even born yet and we're already going to make the worst parent's in history! We're doomed, Lewis... It can't come yet!"

I quickly take a hold of my wife's hands, looking Cleo deep in the eyes as I push a piece of hair away from her face and tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. I know that I need to chill out and calm down Cleo quickly and muster up as much of my own confidence and courage as I can to be able to relax her a little, enough to be able to determine whether the symptoms are a false alarm or whether they truly do mean all systems are go.

"I'm scared, Lewis..."

"Honestly, Cleo, so am I. I'm completely terrified. But, I know that we can do this. I know that we can do this parenting thing _damn_ well. And tonight, or in a week, or a year, or ten years, when it starts to get hard, I hope you know that you've got me, because I know that I've got you."

I can see the effect that my reassurance has on my wife as it visibly sets in across her face and soothes her just a little, but enough to stop her freaking out any more. Fortunately. As it seems to be working, I decide to continue speaking and continue soothing her until I can get her up and moving to be able to confirm whether or not my suspicions are correct and we will have a babe in arms over the following hours or whether we will just be boomeranging right back home again tonight to finish up the tasks we are both engaged in.

"I know that change frightens you, Cleo, and I know that things are going to change from now on, but I truly believe that it's for the _better..._. From here on, it's the start of our new life; and the change in our family with our new baby. Our little person that's going to have such a massive role in the rest of our lives now. It's too late to turn back now."

* * *

><p>So Baby McCartney is on the way!

Next chapter: The gender of the baby/ies as well as which characters engaged in the adulterous affair are all to be revealed... Any final guesses?

351 reviews for the next chapter.

26. Innocence Gained, Innocence Lost

**Hey guys, I wanted to give you all a quick update tonight, hence the reason I am quickly doing quite a superficial proofread. Please ignore any typos/tense/grammatical errors, etc. I'll try and go back and re-edit at a later date but I just wanted to get a chapter up while I have the chance to. **

**Thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter. Also, thanks to everyone who joined in and had a bit of fun guessing! There was two guesses for Liam so that seemed to be a winner. I actually quite like that name... However, seeing as I've already written half of the next story with the baby's name I chose, I didn't really feel like changing that... **

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty Six " Innocence Gained, Innocence Lost

"He's perfect. Absolutely perfect..."

After a long, grueling and painful experience for both parties, Cleo and Lewis have finally come out triumphant...Cleo, Lewis and their perfect, healthy, newborn baby son.

Outside, the city is in chaos with the natural disaster, its resulting hazards and damage from the storm and extreme winds both in full bore. Meanwhile, inside, at the same time, the two new parents and one of the tiniest little babies are completely oblivious to any such chaos, any such disharmony and any such worries or concerns. As far as the overjoyed and completely carefree new parents and the innocent baby of a matter of hours old, the world is just as perfect, problem-free and lightweight as they are feeling at the present moment.

The baby in Cleo's arms, the baby being looked down on by the proudest father is truly the picture of his father, with just a few visible genetic inputs from his mother.

Both parents are already besotted and completely in love with their adorable little bundle. Every detail is examined and absorbed, taking in their son's physical being until they can start to see facets of his personal being and the person he is. However, for now, his minuscule little fingers with the fingernails that seem too small to be possible, his tiny little lips that seem so full, yet so thin all at once; his fresh scent and smell that can only be put down to nourished and being previously amphibious for the last nine months. Every single facet of the little person in front of them was completely soaked up, cherished and loved by the proudest parents.

Little Lincoln Maxwell McCartney's 'hair' consists of little tufts of baby hair growing on his scalp and primarily bald head in a shade of brunette to match Cleo's. With his mother's nose, her cheeks and her big, bright eyes with his father's shade of light blue-grey that seem almost sparkly and bright for the newborn as he slowly became aware of his overwhelming surroundings.

In advance and during the gestation period, the brand new parents had shortlisted two baby boy names, and two baby girls to select from once they were able to see which name their new baby suited more. For the first names, they also had a male and a female middle name which they had been planning to use for either of the first names that they selected. Lincoln had been a favourite for both parents, while the other name was one that Cleo was completely insistent on had spent months trying to persuade Lewis on. The one name that was a definite was Maxwell. After the couple's close friend, Max Hamilton, who has helped Lewis to save Cleo's life, been an endless wealth of knowledge for them and encouraged the couple to get back together.

It is a monumental moment " just as nerve-racking as it is exciting for the brand new parents. While the joy of a new life is exciting, it is just as scary, knowing the huge responsibilities and care that will be needed to nurture and protect the child until he is

old enough to it for a lifetime, knowing from that point forward, whatever decisions you make and whatever mistakes are made are going to impact on that innocent little life as it grows up.

All the while knowing that innocence gained is just as easily lost.

* * *

><p>That moment is like an eye-opener. I suddenly see all the instances, all the times in the past that I should have used as a warning. All of the times, that as a married woman, I should have backed off and extinguished the smoldering and the smaller sparks between myself and Kyle.

The thing is what I know more than anything is that if I don't stop myself right this second as Kyle and I near closer and closer together, I know very well what will happen next..._

...

Rikki succumbs and she gives in to temptation, desire and the feelings that she has been trying to avoid acknowledging.

Deep inside, she knows how wrong it is. Deep inside, she hates herself.

However, in the moment of heat and in the moment of passion, everything is working against Rikki as she commits the wrong against her husband, albeit with her best friend's brother.

All the sparks between Kyle and Rikki which have gone without being extinguished by both partiesâ€| Rikki's loneliness that she hasn't dealt with since her husband refused contact with her after being imprisoned months agoâ€| All of Rikki's pent-up anger and hatred of the man she truly loved.

The combination of emotions, unresolved romantic feelings and the heat of the moment is what leads to the unrestrained passion.

Gradually, the pair's kisses speed up, increasing in length and depth, racing out of control as the tryst is led to another room of the apartment.

It doesn't take long before the moment is speeding by faster and faster, until the point of no return, when it's too late to turn back and remake the decisions that Kyle and Rikki have mutually made.

But, most of all, it is too late to go back and undo what has been done â€" what has been done and the damage that has been madeâ€| Not to mention all of the further damage that will be caused as a result.

* * *

><p>"Stayâ€| The weather is bad. One gust of wind could rip the hinges off my front door, your car doorâ€| I want you here. Just stay, here" his face moves closer and closer to mine, I can feel the

gentle, warm tingle of his breath as his head closes in on mine and I can see his intent focus, directed on my lips.

"_Stay with __**me**__, Bella." _

...

If I let myself linger for even just a moment too long, I can feel the pull and I can feel the temptation to just let come what may. The temptation to give in to my ex-boyfriend and the move he is in the process of trying to make on me.

"No, Dan. ****No****. _You_ had your chance and _you_ screwed it up. I'm with Will now and I can't do this to him."

Terror fills Bella as she recognises the need to get out of there. ****Now****. Now, before she does something that she will regret later. Before she starts to consider how just moments earlier it had been like 'old times' and the 'early days' with her former boyfriend.

She knows that she doesn't want to spend too long dwelling on old feelings and old times when so much has changed, including her relationship status and the fact that she's seen the other side to her former boyfriend. That is another frightening terror that Bella recognises, not wanting to dwell on it for too long. She knows the sort of person that Daniel can become when tried and tested, when he doesn't get his own way and especially when he feels threatened.

Bella saw the first changes in her boyfriend when herself and Daniel had begun to drift away just a little while after the 'honeymoon period' wore off from the relationship that they had thrown themselves into hard and fast in the first place. Then, the first time that he hurt her came when Daniel's friend had seen her with Will, out for lunch on the first time seeing each other after their breakup.

Although she hasn't seen any of his bad side _yet_, she knows he can be erratic in his behaviour and his mood and just because she's been safe from him the last eighteen months, it doesn't mean that she still is.

Instantly, she moves away and heads for the door with Daniel following close behind her.

"I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for trying to make a move, but you'd have to be stupid to go out there in conditions like that, in that weather. It's dangerous! You could be exposed or get yourself killed â€" I'll leave it up to you to decide which one of those is worse. Just stay here, I promise that I'll leave you be."

Daniel Shapiro is a lot of things. However, he does not fall under the banner of 'dumb'. Bella knows that he has a valid point.

"Fine. I'll stay until the storm clears up."

Despite the fact that she wants to be anywhere but there, the functional and logical side of Bella's brain kicks in enough to make enough sense of the fact that Dan is right and if she does go out there in those weather conditions, she could very well be making a

mistake that will get herself killed and ending up in a body bag. However, just because she is confined to her former boyfriend's house it does not mean that she is completely isolated.

So, Bella picks up her phone, tucks away her guilt for getting herself in such a position in the first place and prepares to protect herself from any of her own weaknesses and resistance around her ex as well as protecting herself from any erratic behaviour coming from that ex.

"Hey you... What are you and our girl up to?"

* * *

><p>After waiting a good few hours, the storm finally dies down just enough for Bella to be able to safely leave Dan's house. She is able to make it from the house to her car without the chaotic wind and rain exposing her, the conditions being safe enough to drive herself home safely enough without unpredictable flying and falling debris posing a risk and compromising her safety.<p>

Walking up to the door of her apartment that she shares with her daughter and temporarily with her brother, Bella fumbles through her bag for her house keys. Despite her efforts to forget, she is still shaking from the events of the afternoon, guilt-ridden for even getting herself into that position and at that crossroads in the first place. However, she has the peace of mind of knowing how much worse the events of the afternoon could have transpired.

After plucking the keys out of her handbag, the lingering shake of her hands makes it difficult for her to press the key into its custom and personalised hole on the door handle. As soon as she inserts the key, with a twist of her wrist to simultaneously turn the key and open the door she calls out to her brother, hoping he will provide the distraction she needs to get her mind off of her own guilt from the afternoon.

"Kyle? Are we talking again? I'm home... Kyle?"

As her brother emerges from a room in her apartment, Bella quickly learns that he is not alone, seeing one of her best friend's cowering behind him shamefully.

To Bella, to any stranger or passer-by and even to blind Freddy, it is crystal clear and more than obvious as to what Kyle and Rikki's activities have included over the afternoon.

The pairs flushed cheeks.

Kyle and Rikki's skew-whiff attire.

The duos individual disheveled hair.

It is like a great, big neon sign, lit up and illuminating the path to one conclusion.

The sister and the friend of the cowering couple stands just metres away. Across from them, she feels her stomach drop.

"Don't tell me this is what it looks like... Please tell me that

there's another explanation..." Bella pleas, even though she knows just as well as the couple standing across from her does that there isn't. No matter how much any of the three of them wished that there is.

What's done is done. Now, there is no going back. Not for anyone.

It all happens just like that. Just as the innocence of a new life and a fresh start is gained with a new life; especially that of baby Lincoln's, just as easily is that innocence lost as is the case with Rikki and Kyle unforgivable acts and unrestrained self-control

* * *

><p>There you have it! I was conscious of the fact that the cliffhangers have been spread out over the last two chapters so I wanted to resolve it for you sooner rather than later.

**I really hope you liked the chapter. It was quite allusive, since I knew that I didn't want to write Cleo's birth or Rikki & Kyle's affair explicitly so I hope that alluding to it all came across okay.
**

**Now its time for your thoughts! On the baby name, Bella/Daniel, Rikki/Kyle or how it affects their counterparts. Really just let me know anything! **

Next chapter: Sparks fly between siblings, couples and friends in the aftermath of the affair, while Will also learns of Bella and Dan's rendezvous.

365 reviews for chapter 27.

27. When Sparks Fly

Hey all. I _so_ wanted this chapter to be up sooner, but I just haven't had the time to edit it. The hugest thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter!

**Also, kudos to WannabeeAussie who made the Lewis + Lincoln = Lincoln Lewis connection. I was so stuck with what to call him so I actually named him Lincoln because of that, ha ha. **

In answer to several questions about the name and if it'll be nicknamed, yes. I rarely refer to him as Lincoln anymore. He's become Link and Little Link instead**.**

**FFP fun fact: The book I am currently reading is written by Ali Benjamin. Ha ha, so perhaps my Allie Benjamin will grow up to be an author? **

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty Seven " When Sparks Fly

No one's POV

Over the span of the last twenty four hours, the Gold Coast, most of the south coast of Queensland and the northern coast of New South

Wales has been exposed to the wild and injurious news-worthy weather.

The sand and shore of the beaches along the coast had been tossed around and churned up. Sand has risen metres and metres up the shore of the beach, even rendering some beaches unusable until the sand is balanced and re-established manually across the tourist hot-spots that the Gold Coast is known and loved for.

Trees and foliage are down all the way through the city, with similar debris scattered around for hundreds of kilometres in every direction.

The natural disaster had done it's far share of damage and created a havoc through the city. The storms and downpour of rain had meant flooding, there'd been wild and outrageous winds that society is no match for and there had been the injurious, risky and downright frightening thunder and lightning.

Even despite flooding, trees and debris, damaged beaches and winds that are strong and fierce enough to result in doors being pulled off of cars, there has also been some damage that had been done by two people that almost felt worse than any of that other physically catastrophic damage combined...

****Previouslyâ€|****

"Kyle? Are we talking again? I'm home... Kyle?"

_As her brother emerges from a room further in her apartment, Bella quickly learns that he is not alone, seeing one of her best friend's cowering behind him shamefully. _

_To Bella, to any stranger or passer-by and even to blind Freddy, it is crystal clear, more than obvious as to what Kyle and Rikki's activities have included over the afternoon. _

"Don't tell me this is what it looks like... Please tell me that there's another explanation..." Bella pleas, even though she knows as well as the couple standing across from her does that there isn't. No matter how much any of the three of them wished that there is.

* * *

><p>From the moment that her eyes laid on her brother, she knows what Kyle has just done. Then, from the moment that her eyes fell on Rikki -one of her married best friends- cowering behind her brother she knew _who_ Kyle has just done.

"I don't believe thisâ€| I expected more from _**both**_ of you" Bella spat disgustedly, storming straight passed the couple and through her apartment, as if looking for what other damage has been done in the time that she left her home earlier in the day.

Instead, she finds her brother's bag that he had brought with him into her home, the bag which held his personal possessions that he had unloaded just months ago when he first came to stay with Bella.

"I want you out Kyle. NOW!" Bella hisses firmly, throwing any and

every object around the apartment that she identifies as belonging to her older brother in with each other.

Bella's reaction to the affair and her first instinct is to kick her brother out and send him packing. All the while, the couple who inspired the reaction just look at each other warily, wanting to jump in and stop her, but knowing that neither of them have the right to.

"I'm sorry Bella! You don't need to throw Kyle out!" Rikki finally pipes up guiltily at the result of her actions with the other man, also marking her first words in the time that Bella walked in on the interrupted afternoon.

Bella turns around, viciously looking her friend up and down, looking at her with a fraction of the dignity and a fraction of the respect that she would even have looked at her same friend with just a matter of hours earlier.

"You're sorry for what? Sorry cheating on your husband with my brother? Or are you just sorry that I found out about it?"

Neither Rikki, nor Kyle muster up an answer for Bella's question which by going unanswered, just adding fuel to her fire that is already blazing after her scandalous discovery.

"Yeah, that's what I thoughtâ€¦" Bella adds, replying to her own question that she had posed to the other two in the room just a moment or two beforehand. Her own answer just gives her the fuel and courage she needs to continue and persist with kicking her brother out of her home that she had welcomed him into.

As Kyle and Rikki wordlessly cower behind Bella, helplessly watching on as she erratically 'packs' by throwing all of Kyle's belongings into his travel bag at once, she is interrupted as there is a simultaneous and coordinated jangle of text message ringtones. Both she and Rikki receive a message at the same time from the same source.

Despite her momentary pause when she considers stopping to read her message, Bella doesn't, continuing with her focus on collecting and compiling all of her brother's belongings until Rikki reads out a summary of the exact same message that both girls had received.

"Cleo had the baby. A little boyâ€¦ They're up for visitors."

Bella stops in her tracks and succumbs to a smile that automatically and fleeting graces her lips as she forgets all about the affair that she had walked into earlier in the day. For just a moment, Bella is genuinely happy for her friends who have just become brand new parents for the very first time â€" a joy accentuated by the fact that it is directly understandable for her.

"I'll visit them once I'm done hereâ€¦ I'm assuming you'll want to too" Bella says in the most emotion-free monotone voice that she can wrangle up, directing her statement at Rikki who gives back a simple and silent nod.

Bella acknowledges Rikki's wordless answer with a succinct nod of her

own, before throwing the final items into her brother's bag and prompting the guiltier blond to speak up worriedly.

"Please don't you dare say a word about this in front of the others."

"Of course I wouldn't. Your lack of self-control can wait to ruin everyone's day another time. I'm not going to take the spotlight off Cleo, Lewis and their baby."

As Bella hands Kyle his prepared bag filled with his possessions she walks towards the door with enough body language to reveal that the trio wouldn't be lingering in the apartment for much longer. Instead, shortly the girls would mask the latest happenings to visit their mutual friends along with their newborn baby, with Kyle knowing he has been told to hit the road, a familiar concept for the frequent-flyer.

But, before any of these departures occur, there is still things that need to be said and handled first.

"Rikki, can you leave us for a moment?"

The normally fearless blonde didn't speak another word, nor did she dare to resist her friend's request as she quickly fled the room.

The tough and angry exterior that Bella has been managing to maintain throughout her discovery, throughout her lectures to her brother and her friend and throughout throwing her brother out quickly cracks as soon as she is left alone with her brother.

"How could you do this, Kyle? Mum and dad taught us better than thatâ€¦| We were raised to be better than that."

Any rage is quickly converted to hurt and disappointment as tears threaten to quake Bella's eyes. It is killing her to think that the same set of values and the same morals that both her and her brother had been raised with could be shattered so badly by Kyle.

"I knowâ€¦| For what it's worth, I'm so sorry, Bella. More than anything, I'm sorry for disappointing you."

For the very first time in this afternoon's saga among the highs and the lows for both himself and for the other girls involved in the affair, Kyle begins to realise the extent and ramifications of his actions, as well as the extent of the unforgivable mistake that he had and Rikki had made in ignoring their mutual feelings which led to pursuing each other.

Both siblings are just as distraught and just as disappointed so Kyle tries to wrap his arms around his younger and only sister in front of him. While Bella tries to stay strong, labor her point by staying angry with her brother and her best friend, her hurt and desire to be comforted gets the better of her just briefly, for a moment as she succumbs to her older brother's arms. Just as quickly though, she pushes his chests just enough to move herself out of his arms, away from her.

"No, Kyleâ€¦| Just get out. I don't have a place for you here anymore."

I'll say goodbye to Allie for you."

* * *

><p>Later in the day, Bella and Rikki both traveled separately to reach their friends home, trailing into the Sertori's home not long after each other.<p>

Firstly, Bella had been kind enough to drive her brother to the nearest accommodation and pay for a few days to stay while he sorts his next move out and where he will go next since being kicked out by her. However, as she reaches the front door of her friend's house, she is quickly invited into the home by the beaming new father who hasn't had the smile wiped off his face since meeting his son.

"Congratulations Lewis!" Bella smiles, giving her a friend a congratulatory hug, putting on a façade to mask any of the events from earlier in her day; all of the events that range from rejecting Daniel to the blow out that had resulted from what she had discovered upon returning home to her apartment.

"Thanks Bella. Come in and see him! You can have a cuddle if you can get him off your boyfriend."

Walking through to the Sertori's lounge room, Bella is greeted by four familiar faces since Cleo, Kim, Will and Allie are all scattered across the room, all there for the one reason and purpose of being with the new parents and their newborn son.

Bella takes a seat next to her boyfriend, the current baby-holder as she absorbs the new baby that is a new addition and a new part of everyone in that room's life. She takes a moment to lean down and stroke the very top of the sleeping infants head with her thumb that seems gigantic in comparison.

"Aw wow, he's truly beautiful guys. Congratulations."

Wordlessly, Will hands over the baby to his girlfriend, aware of the fact that she is just as absorbed with the littlest member of the room as his daughter is, after Allie had become transfixed with the 'real baby' as soon as she walked into the room.

"Yeah, I agreeâ€| He's almost as beautiful as his dad" Will smirks, making light of his girlfriend's genuine comment and teasing his mate all in one hit.

"Does the little guy have a name?" Bella asks, ignoring Will's dig and moving the conversation on.

Across the room from their son, the elated couple look to each other, each nodding at the question while quietly making eye contact to decide who is to tell their friend the answer to her question.

"Yeah, he does. His name's Lincolnâ€| Little Link" Lewis smiles proudly, announcing his son's name after his wife's eye contact encourages him to speak up.

Bella coos over the name of the little boy that is old news to Will

since he had been informed of it not all that long after he and his daughter had arrived to visit. However, any lightness and joy of the moment becomes that little denser and heavier as Rikki walks in the door, inviting herself into her friends home.

"Hey guysâ€¦ Congratulations" Rikki smiles persuasively and confidently. If you didn't know better, no one could mistake her for the same girl that had been cowering behind a man just an hour or so earlier in the day.

As soon as she enters the room, the blond receiver is not the only one who can feel the chill of the ice age that sets in with her arrival.

After giving her two friends a warm hug, she moves over to Bella to see the baby that she is there to congratulate the new parents on and to meet. However, despite the fact that the girls are forced into a close radius as Rikki examines and has a look down at baby Lincoln, Bella doesn't meet her eyes, looking away and snubbing her off while Rikki is just as bad, not breaking her eye contact from the baby, nor extending her visual radius just centimetres more to look at or to acknowledge her friend who is holding the baby.

Both girls rudeness goes unnoticed by Cleo and Lewis who are too absorbed with watching their friends reaction of their new son. However, even despite the distraction of Allie wanting to be bounced around on her father's lap, Will takes a note of the coldness between his girlfriend and the other girl who he considers to be one of his closest friends.

Eventually after some conversation between the five adults, the cold thaws out significantly to the point that the intensity almost grows too hot and uncomfortable between the two as they manage to direct every comment to become a snide comment or remark at the other girl. Either that, or block them out the other girl completely with dirty looks or glares and prematurely ending conversations.

It is immature, it is childish and it is intense.

From the moment that Rikki had walked in, Will had been onto the behaviour between the girls. In fact, even Cleo and Lewis are slowly becoming aware of the attitude between the girls that is beginning to penetrate into their blissful bubble of oblivion.

Currently, conversation has just reached a plateau while the two youngest in the room have become the focus. Allie's repeated request is finally fulfilled as she is given a hold of the newborn baby with the help of and under the close watch of her own father to ensure she handles him correctly.

"He's so cute. I don't think that this boy has boy germs" Allie giggles as she gazes down at the baby in her arms, completely besotted.

Allie's innocence and her enthusiasm becomes the centre of attention for quite a while to the adults that are present, as she asks anyone who will answer her every question that pops into her little mind, ranging from "Why is his name Lincoln?" to "How come he's so small?" and "Why is he a boy baby and not a girl baby?"

However, it is only while witnessing her daughter cooing over the baby, that Bella sees an opportunity and seizes the moment to make yet another snarky comment at her friend that she is currently at odds with since earlier today.

"So Allie likes babies... Maybe I should urge Kyle to doing something about getting her a cousin. Mind you, I wonder what the chances are that something about that has already been done...?"

Rikki rolls her eyes across the room. Even in her eyes, you can see the reflection of the fire that has to begun to blaze within her from the comment.

"Oh yeah?! And what exactly is that supposed to mean, Bella?"

To the others in the room, Rikki's questioning of Bella's insinuation can be considered to be feasible. However, although she doesn't admit it and although she doesn't want to admit it, Rikki does know what Bella means.

To Cleo, Lewis and Will, the riddles that both girls are alluding to makes them seem as though they have lost their marbles. That, and the fact that before today, the girl's friendship had been completely and unquestionably normal. What has happened to the girls is a matter that is left to the imagination as nothing adds up.

However, it is too late and from this point on, both girls have well and truly reached a point of no returnâ€|

"I think you know what I mean, Rikki. Unless you would like me to spell it out for you; let the others in on it?" Bella says, venomously shooting the questions at her friend with a sharp glare that is returned and rebounded back to her, twice as bad.

After the intensity between the girl's reaches a head with their very public spat, Lewis pipes up to get answers before the girls can progress from bickering to yelling to hair-pulling.

"Is something going on girls?" Lewis hesitantly questions, almost as though he is curious for an answer to his question, but he is just as nervous and apprehensive to hear the answer to the question that he appears to regret asking in the first place.

Before either Rikki or Bella have a chance to answer Lewis's question, Will asks him to keep an eye on his daughter who he had been overseeing as she held the other man's son. Immediately after Lewis crouches next to Allie and the infant, Will rises from his own seat next to her, looking to the two girls -who have been the origin of the tense, awkward discomfort in the room- in the eye with an nonnegotiable sternness.

"Bella. Rikki. Outside - ****now****."

While Bella is prompt to stand up, cross her arms and sulk out of the room as she follows her boyfriend outside, Rikki is a little more resistant. She waits a good half a minute or so, conveying a few sighs loudly to her friends, along with her expression of displeasure at having to listen to someone else before she finally gets up from her seat with a stomp and trails out of the room to the front yard where Bella and Will are standing together already.

"What the hell is going on in there girls?!"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask your girlfriend, Will?" Rikki retaliates calmly before shooting her unimpressed glare and expression to Bella. "And what the hell happened to not saying anything in front of the others today?!"

Out of reflex, Bella instantly spits out the statement that she has been bursting at the seams to say outright, after having danced around the issue and dropping hints to make her guilty friend squirm in front of their friends.

"I caught her and Kyle together when I got home! She cheated on Zane!"

Rikki rolls her eyes and slams her arms crossed, failing to give in and let her guilt be seen even when her own mistakes are at the fore in front of both Bella and now Will.

"Oh yeah? That's really hypocritical coming from you, Bella. Kyle also happened to mention where you were today too... At your ex-boyfriend's house? Alone? And did Will know about that?!"

As he feels a pang of hurt in his heart, the only male involved in the confrontation between the trio outside instantly looks at his partner who is looking straight down at her toe-revealing shoes and the concrete footpath below her.

"Bella? Is that true?"

After realising it isn't so great when blame and bad decisions are turned back around on you, it takes Bella a few moments and another call of her name to urge her to respond to the difficult and confronting question that she is wishing to find a way to avoid explaining to her boyfriend.

"Yes it is... I'm sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal..."

While Will has managed to make a good mediator and referee between the girls to this point, when the secrets turn around and begin to involve him, his patience and calm begins to disintegrate rapidly.

"Why on earth would you not tell me that you're meeting up with him?! You don't think that I'd like to know that you're meeting up with Daniel without me, without anyone?! All not mentioning it does is make it seem to me that you are just sneaking around, hoping that I won't find out."

Bella sighs with an exhale of her own guilt, while Rikki is relieved that there is a small break between her own mistakes being highlighted with a big neon sign after the events of the day. Will for one has completely forgotten about his friend cheating on his best mate while his own girlfriend's loyalties are under question as she clutches his hands with her own to keep him there while she does her best to explain her own story.

"I'm sorry, Will. It just sort of... happened. I didn't intend or arrange to meet up with him alone, but I tried to call him the other

day to let him know that we don't need any more help and that we know why Allie was sick . The problem was that he was busy at the time so I said I'd call him back another time, but he said that meeting up would suit him better, so I just said yes and I didn't think anything of it."

Will exhales deeply after Bella wraps up and concludes her very long-winded explanation with an evidently pleading, please-forgive-me tone before he gives her any answer back.

"You promise, Bella? And nothing happened? Did he try anything when you were alone?"

"Well, I promise that's how it happened and I promise you that nothing happened between us, but he did try something" Bella honestly and quietly answers as her gaze reverts to the floor and her own feet as she unleashes the difficult answer she gives her boyfriend.

While Will sighs at the hard truth of the honesty that his girlfriend has just dealt him, Rikki on the other hand scoffs as she stifles a hypocritical laugh.

"Shut up, Rikki. I haven't forgotten about you" Will sharply says as he addresses the other blonde who is just as in the wrong, if not more so, before asking his girlfriend the difficult question to know how another man had made a move on her. "What do you mean by 'he did try something'? What happened? He didn't pressure you or hurt you again did he?!"

"No... I started feeling uncomfortable being alone with him. Then he tried to kiss me and he asked me to stay with him, be with him, as I was leaving. I said no and got out of there as soon as I could. That's why I called you earlier - to stop him from trying anything else until the storm passed and until I could leave safely. I made sure nothing happened with him - I told him I couldn't do that when I love you."

It takes a few moments, but after considering the information that Bella has explained to him, Will is happy and sufficiently satisfied by the answer that his girlfriend gives him.

"Alright, I trust you. Just let me know and talk to me about it next time you go visiting an ex, okay?"

Bella nods sincerely, with a small and appreciative smile at Will. However, at the same time Rikki's eye roll doesn't go unnoticed by her friend, especially considering their current feud of the day and throughout the afternoon.

"Shut up Rikki. You are in no position to roll your eyes and give me a hard time. I managed not to cheat on my boyfriend, I even avoided a kiss... But I'm sure your husband is going to be so pleased that you couldn't even keep your legs shut while he's locked up! You're really nailing that whole marriage thing..."

Bella's harsh comment angers Rikki to the point that she has to control her own fiery temper and the temptation she has to unleash her fury on her friend in the same way that got her husband imprisoned for his anger in the first place. Bella knew and she expected the sort of reaction that her comment would incite. However,

what Bella had not known before speaking is just how deep her words had hit Rikki's scarring and attempts to heal since Zane had shut her out of his life for the time being.

A few moments ago, Bella had wanted Rikki to hurt. Her best friend and her boyfriend had betrayed her trust and committed the unforgivable. In an alternate universe, the pairing would be a dream come true for the blonde who would love one of her best friend's to have partnered up. However, that dream is completely compromised when that best friend is already partnered up, having married earlier in the year.

"My _marriage_?! _I_ don't even know what state my marriage is! Does Zane even consider me his wife anymore?! It's pretty damn hard to gauge when your husband has cut you off for the last few and isn't even wanting to see you!"

As soon as the result of her previous words is clear, Bella instantly wants to take them back. She even hurts for her friend she had been wanting to hurt in the same way.

Will and Bella just look to each other as Rikki's breathing becomes heavier and heavier, consuming more and more of her as the walls that she has put up to hold the weight on her shoulders begins to cave in while she crumbles.

It is clear that Rikki has reached her limit; that she has reinforced her own vulnerabilities, her own threshold and the fact that she is only human.

As hard as she can try to hide it and as hard as she can try to bounce back from the recent trying events, she still feels, she still hurts and she still has no right to be treated the way her husband has done so in neglecting her and ignoring the fact that she is hurting from his imprisonment too.

"I just don't understand! Zane's allowed to do whatever he wants, and I'm just meant to roll with it? He's so weak that he doesn't want to be seen in jail, but he's allowed to leave me alone and in the lurch! And Tam... She couldn't even feel like she could tell me about her bulimia! No one turns to me, no one wants me to support them and no one wants to support me... Instead I'm just expected to shoulder their messes and roll with their decisions. It's pretty lonely when people keep shutting you out of their life."

As Rikki reaches breaking point, her lowest after months of fighting and being strong for herself, for her husband and for her sister, she begins to tear up and sob uncontrollably which surprises Bella and Will as much as, or more, than hearing about the full extent of all that she has been shouldering alone recently.

"I don't need you to tell me, Bella. I know what I did is wrong and I know that the way that Zane's treated me doesn't make what I've done to him right either. With Kyle, he was someone who was there. He listened to me, he hugged me. He let me be with him. He didn't push me away. He made feel anything but lonely... And not feeling that for a short time was just so great, and we went way too far and I already regret that..."

Despite all tension, all the bitter and nasty words that had been

exchanged, all the hurt that both friends had caused the other feel and despite all that has been said and done early today, Bella doesn't hesitate even for a moment when she sees and notices her friend is at the weakest point she's ever seen her; the weakest she's ever been.

Bella pulls Rikki into the biggest, tightest, warmest and most supportive, comforting hug that she can manage.

"Rikki... I'm so sorry... You've done so well up to now - you'll be okay."

For Rikki to return the hug, to let Bella in and to acknowledge that she needs someone else to support her, even in just a hug, is a sign of two things. It indicates that there are thankfully no hard feelings as well as the fact that there is no love lost between the pair of friends.

"I can tell you're sorry Rikki; that you regret cheating on Zane... It's up to you if you want to tell them, but I'm not going to say anything to Cleo or Lewis, or even Tam. If Lewis or Cleo ask questions, I'll just tell them that there was a misunderstanding between us and that we sorted it out."

"Thanks Bella" Rikki replies appreciatively and gratefully; the fewer people that find out about her shame, the better. Will too pipes up to participate in a similar agreement as his girlfriend had, reassuring his friend that unless she wants otherwise, her scandal would stay between the four already involved.

However, as Bella pulls away from her hug with Rikki and looks into her eyes encouragingly, she makes sure that she outlines the one final condition of her secrecy.

"We won't tell the others... But, you do have to tell Zane. You can't keep something like that from him..."

* * *

><p>To be quite honest, I had no idea that I could write ONE scene that was that flipping long. Anyway, I'd love to know your thoughts on all of the happenings of late and what you think is yet to come. There are only 3 (possibly 4 if I split the last chapter) chapters left of FFP 2! Any opinions on what you think is still yet to transpire?

385 reviews for the next chapter. To be quite honest, I think the next chapter is one of my favourites of the sequel!

Next chapter: It's a high school reunion and old faces are brought back left right and center. Cleo struggles without Link, Rikki just struggles and Bella struggles with a surprise that will change her relationship with Will.

28. Time Turn Over

Hey hey. New chapter. I really hope you will enjoy it guys since I'm quite happy with this chapter.

**Thank you, thank you, thank you every one who reviewed the last chapter. I'm so grateful of you all. **

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty Eight " Time Turn Over

No one's POV

The stage is set. Literally. The live music is ready and waiting, the drinks are cold, the tables and walls of the hall are embellished, the girls are jazzed up and the boys are scrubbed up. Everyone attending is ready and waiting for the event to begin.

The event? It has just reached the five year milestone since Cleo, Rikki, Bella, Lewis and Will's high school graduation as the class of 2009. That date prompted the organisation of a half-decade high school reunion with invitations being sent out and set for tonight. As much as the initial event, the conclusion of high school seems and feels like just yesterday, if you consider all of the changes that have taken place in the people and their lives in that time it almost feels as though double that time could have passed.

Old faces, new couples, offspring, old cliques and groups that have stayed together are littered among the cluster of former teachers and former students.

Life has been smooth sailing for some in the room, while for others, tonight is a reminder of how good life had been. Old acquaintances seem to act as old friends with any familiarity being enough to stand the test of time for one night. It's a reminder of the kind of person who some people were and the kind of person that some people still are.

As people -teachers, former students, their partners and the occasional child- begin arriving, out of the group Bella and Will arrive first, arriving on time and punctually with their daughter who is instantly engrossed with the party atmosphere -music, decorations, bunting, drinks, food, balloons and people- from the minute she arrives with her parents.

Although Rikki's aim had been to arrive the latest that she could possibly manage, aiming to be the last in and the first out, her friends, the new parents, snagged that title off of her.

That's if they ever actually arrive...

* * *

><p>Lewis's POV

"And his bottle? You know where the formula is? And you know how to test how hot the milk is so it doesn't burn his mouth?" Cleo babbles worriedly, looking to my father-in-law and stepmother-in-law who just give her affirmative nods of confirmation that yes, they both know how to care for a baby that they have already spent much time looking after.

Tonight is the five year high school reunion for both Cleo and I and our classmates. That in itself is a bit of a milestone, but tonight

also marks the first time that we are leaving our son in the care of anyone else, without either of us staying with him.

Lincoln is a few weeks old now and he's just managed to get passed waking at some of the insane hours of night that he enjoyed to in frequent intervals since his birth.

I am significantly more at ease than my wife is with leaving our son in the care and capable hands of his grandparent's and aunt for a few hours while we enjoy our first, much needed night out on the town since Link's birth. This is a pattern I've noticed over the last few weeks. Cleo's anxieties and worries have become magnified and multiplied a hundred times more with the arrival of our son.

I've been hoping that tonight will provide the much-needed detachment that we both need individually to keep ourselves sane, but also what we need as a couple to have just a little bit of time where our much-loved and doted over little man isn't the only focus of our life. It's like we just need a little re-calibration and adjustment to meld our old life and our old habits with our new life where Lincoln has our 100% focus and attention 24/7.

Tonight has proven a good opportunity for this as he is old enough to be left alone with and cared for by his grandparent's for the evening, but he isn't old enough for us to have been able to take him to the event while truly enjoying ourselves and making the most of it. So really, in relation to Link's age, the high school reunion has been organised and coordinated for the perfect point of time.

"Come on, Cleo. We should get going or we'll be late" I gently nudge and encourage my wife, all the while knowing her hormonal fragility and emotional imbalance from her pregnancy that hasn't completely disintegrated just yet.

Cleo sighs hesitantly pulling herself away from our son longingly, but not before pressing another kiss to the forehead of the baby who is contently settled within his grandfather's arms as he speaks, enforcing and reiterating what I had just said to his daughter.

"I agree with Lewis. You two should be leaving. Lincoln's going be absolutely fine here. We all know how to look after him, and if anything does happen to come up you know that we've got both of your numbers. Now go, relax and have a good night out!"

I sling my arm around my wife's back affectionately as a means to subtly coerce her away from our baby and urge her out of the house, hoping for us just to leave before the night is over.

"Come on, Cleo. He'll still be here when we get back and at this rate, Link's going to have more fun than us tonight."

"Bye baby..." Cleo releases a begrudging sigh and I work to make the most of her one, single step away from our son, continuing the steps and forcing her to walk along with me from our current physical attachment.

With a silent wave to my in-laws, I leave the house and shut the front door behind my wife and I, escorting her out as we head on our way out to our high school's reunion.

* * *

><p>Walking inside our former gymnasium that is being used as a hall for the event, I almost immediately see my friends standing out in the room like neon yellow highlighters.<p>

By simply seeing them from across the hall, it's unbelievable how much you can read into each of them.

It's clear to see that Emma is the most confident, Even though she hasn't been around for the most part since our final year of high school, she is evidently the most comfortable and confident in her surroundings. It's almost like she never left her hometown at all. She's all smiles, waving to people across the room in between her brief greetings to familiar people who pass her by. As with most aspects of Ash and Emma's coupling, Ash is obviously the complete opposite of his girlfriend, almost appearing to search for one familiar soul in the room outside of our group of friends as he simply politely smiles at everyone communicating with Emma.

Two of my other friends are in a similar position of unfamiliarity but with far less care over that fact. Bella and Will are completely unbothered by their surroundings, but instead, the couple are completely engrossed in each other as he nuzzles her neck, whispering goodness knows what in her ear that makes her giggle uncontrollably. Their experience at our high school had been very brief and very secluded. Not only is the final year of high school the shortest, completing our final exams and assignments weeks before the rest of the year eight to elevers, but they also had kept themselves mostly confined to our own group. Really, they didn't have much time or interest for fellow classmates amongst the tentacle, the comet, their own will-we-won't-we relationship dilemmas and the issue of simply passing year twelve.

As much as they are unfussed by the predominantly unfamiliar surroundings and environment, the lovebirds appear to be in a very different position to my wife and I as we try to etch our son from our memory for the sake of enjoying a night out for the very first time. In contrast, the seasoned parents have their daughter at the event with them but almost appear to have forgotten their child lingering around their ankles as they are consumed by each other. Allie is contently standing beside her parents, almost as oblivious to her parents as they are to her while she happily consumes (or whatever you call unintentionally spreading something as widely across your face as possible) a chocolate muffin that looks far too big in the little girls hands.

Next to our social butterfly friend who is most in her element at the high school reunion, Rikki looks vulnerable. Her body language is clearly trying to pull off her a confident stance that she became so good at in high school as we first met her and first tried to penetrate through her walls that separated the true Rikki from the one everyone else knew as the grumpy, moody and possibly-emo blonde.

For one of the strongest women, one of the strongest people I know, it's been completely unusual to see how weak she has seemed of late. She hasn't been the same since the day she and the others came over to see Link. While this isn't completely obvious to passerby's and to her acquaintances; myself and our friends know her better than that.

I for one can see the truth, the weakness and the vulnerability shining through in her eyes.

As Cleo and I approach the group, we are met with a greeting from Emma, hug of our legs from Allie, a wave from Bella and a smile from Will.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

I must have some sort of sixth sense to be able to distinguish that the response from Rikki is not directed at us, so I swing my head back to her line of vision and see the brunette I haven't seen for, what? Six months? ...

* * *

><p>Zane's POV

I'd been warned that the freedom I was once so accustomed and used to may seem overwhelming after my release from the confinement of the relatively small prison walls and jail cell that I had been living in for the last six months of my life.

As much as I would never admit it to anyone else, whoever had been warning me in jail about how differently things are viewed when you come out after being in, is proving themselves to be right...

As I enter my former high schools decorated and embellished gymnasium looking for some familiarity, especially in the form of my wife, I look at all the faces and all the people that I thought I had left behind years ago. I've seen from afar and purposely avoided Nate and a couple of my old mates and I've already walked past Miriam Kent who looks both significantly more plastic, with significantly more of her than in high school.

My personal invitation for the high school reunion had been one of the many sealed envelopes that Rikki just forwarded onto the jail over the last few months. I didn't even know for sure whether Rikki will be here or not tonight, I simply knew that the reunion coincided very well with my release from prison which came a few weeks early, potentially giving me the opportunity to surprise my wife with my presence at the event.

The mail had been her only contact with me over the course of all of those months, out of my choice. Cutting Rikki off is a decision that had been painfully hard for me to do and for me to stick to and while I regret the consequences of my decision, at the same time I wouldn't go back and do it any other way.

While I had made the decision that I couldn't see my wife, or more so, that I wouldn't allow her to see me while I was in prison, I could only hope that she hasn't and won't make the decision to continue the trend which I had set and decide that she can't see me out of prison.

Scanning my marginally overwhelming surroundings - the blasting music, the flashing lights, the bantering, the gossiping, the giggling, the socialisation and the promises to 'stay in touch this time' of hundreds of students who are enjoying the event to catch up and reconnect after most having parted along with graduation is

becoming intense after six months of isolation. In my search across the room, my friends Cleo and Lewis are the first that stand out as familiar faces that I actually want to see as I witness them walking over to a group of people, before my gaze quickly grows and expands to see Emma, my best friend, his girlfriend, their daughter and my wife all standing together, seeming to be mostly happy with just chattering among themselves.

I don't hesitate in walking over among the greetings of Cleo and Lewis's arrival which seems to absorb everyone's attention, except my wife.

Rikki's glance meets me and we lock eye contact. I can visibly see her polar reactions that play out across her expression. Within a matter of seconds I can see the ecstasy in her face which disintegrates to disgust, before a swipe of joy spreads across it until finally, a confused frown settles as she comes to terms with my unexpected presence. Her uncontrollable reaction out of reflex fortunately gives me insight to and lets me in on the thoughts and feelings which are unlikely to be verbally expressed by my wife.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Rikki questions and I know it is at me rather than her friends. She seems to have gained a little more composure than what she had initially as she crosses her arms as I see her walls flying up to keep me out.

"Surprise..." I feebly state as I'm placed in a position where I am so unconfident as to what to do or say next for one of the very few moments in my life.

There's an awkward silence and tension in the air as I see a similar joy-turned-sour flood over Will's face, while the others in the group look to Rikki, unsure of what to do or say next. Not that I know there are Team-Zane and Team-Rikki sides, but I quickly discover that our friends are pro-Rikki... Except for one person who didn't seem to see the sides.

"Uncle Zane's back! Can I play that game on your computer at my daddy's house now?!"

The innocence and excitement of the four-year-old is just the icebreaker that is needed to break through the silence that my presence has created among the group.

Will is the next to follow in the footsteps of his daughter and greet me, but in a far more neutral manner than normal for the guy who I consider as my best mate.

"It's good to see you, man."

Aside from his greeting, there is a coldness. It didn't take me long within my stint in prison to realise that he had been ignoring my attempts to contact him and that his reaction to my decision has repercussions and consequence between us.

A similar chorus of not completely comfortable greetings and '_how are you's_' follows by everyone except the one person I am wanting to hear it from more than any of the others.

That person exhales a sigh before pushing her way out through the group and through the swarm of old schoolmates until she has well and truly both me and the building we had been in.

Fleeing to our high school soccer field, adjacent to the oval, I follow Rikki to where she has made a seat for herself on the grass in the moonlight, looking out over the field. I silently take a seat beside her and she slowly glances at me momentarily before fixing her gaze on the pitch in front of us.

"Do you remember that soccer game where Emma used her powers to help Elliot?" Rikki questions before pausing, not moving her vision from where I assume the event had played out years earlier. "Oh that's right. You weren't there then, either. Much like the last five months and thirteen days."

I sigh and as hard as Rikki's criticism is for me to take, I know that it's completely deserved and self-inflicted. But, knowing that still doesn't make it any easier to swallow that bitter pill.

"I'm sorry Rikki. As hard as I'm sure it was on you, I'm not sorry for the way that I went about shutting you out. What I am sorry for is what I did to Daniel and the fact that I ended up in jail in the first place."

This time, it's Rikki's turn to sigh, briefly glancing at me before she proceeds to speak.

"I don't think you do know, or at least understand just how hard you being away was on me. But the thing is that there's something I have to tell you Zane. It's something you're not going to like hearing."

I swallow, trying to anticipate the words that I won't like hearing, alluding to the fact that there is going to be more that I won't like the sound of. I don't speak or say a word before Rikki proceeds talking and little do I know, beginning to confess her sins to me.

"Life has really, really hard for me while you were away. I didn't adjust well without you and then I found out not that long ago that I did have a reason to be concerned about Tam and her behaviour... She was diagnosed with bulimia and hospitalised for a stomach bleed a month or so ago."

I stifle a gasp at the events I have missed, clutching Rikki's hand supportively in a feeble attempt to make up for the lack of support I have provided her over the last few months when it sounded like she needed it most.

Instead of accepting my support, she shakes her head and brushes my hand off of her own as she continues to speak, taking a deep breath before lowering the bombshell on me as she looks away from me completely.

"That's not all, Zane. Listen, while you were away, I got involved with Bella's brother... He was staying with Bella and Allie over the last few months and we slowly became friends. He could see how lonely I was and how hard you being put away and Tam's eating disorder was on me. I didn't fight it when we got too close to each other and then

I messed up really, really badly. I did something with him that I've regretted ever since then."

I don't need a dictionary meaning, a definition, a flowchart, a diagram. I know what she means and I don't know how else to take her confession than to stand up, walk off and flee from my wife and my marriage that had just gone from shaky ground, to trembling...

Storming back into the hall, desperately trying to find the alcohol that I feel that I need to be able to digest and cope with the confession that my unfaithful wife has just delivered to me.

"Zane! Maaaaate!" I hear from a familiar voice and a person that I don't even need to see to recognise and identify.

"Naaaaate..." I similarly squawk, but I add an eye roll, copying my high school best friend that I disassociated myself from after I was imprisoned, the first time, after he and some of our other mates let me take the fall and the blame for the graffiti that I had been busted for when they ran off.

"Now, I'm on my way to collect the band for our song together, but we'll have to catch up! Right?! Just like the good old golden days of high school!"

I simply scoff and walk off with absolutely no intention of catching up with him tonight, or ever, as he brushes my snub off in typical Nate manner and trails off to antagonize my best friend, or more likely, his girlfriend...

* * *

><p>Will's POV

Bella and I had been particularly apprehensive about this evening. My last year of high school had been my first and only year that I attended school during my studies and both of us had only spent one year on the Gold Coast attending the high school of the reunion that our friends were forcing us to attend with them.

Honestly, I think if Bella hadn't decided to go, then there is no way that I would have bothered with attending the event that didn't really interest me all that much, with the purpose re-acquainting a group of people that I had mostly only known for just the one school year that I had attended with them. Not to mention, if Bella hadn't have been invited -along with Lewis- to play a song with the band that had dismembered with her pregnancy, I don't really think that she would have even bothered attending the event either.

"After all this time, you just still haven't got that short-and-tight memo, have you, Bels?" Nate says as my best friend's former best friend that I had never liked walks over to us with disapproval. His unwanted gaze examines my girlfriend's body and the flowing lacy dress that could be considered short enough by anyone other than Nate.

Slinging his arm around my girlfriend takes me right back to some of our last days of high school and post-graduation along with the sinking feelings I would get in my stomach when Nate sleazed around

Bella, just like he would on any other person of the female gender.

"Who's that man hugging mummy?" Allie asks me as she tugs gently on the denim material of my jeans to catch my attention amongst the noise.

Before I have a chance to reply to my daughter, Nate pipes up again as he sees Allie.

"Ah! It's a small Bella... It's not mine is it? I know you wanted me bad and all that, Bella -not that I can blame you- but my memory's just a bit hazy of how far we went."

Bella and I roll our eyes simultaneously. While tonight is a night of realisation that a lot has changed since high school concluded, Nate is just proving himself as a testament as to what has not changed in the slightest since high school.

"In your dreams, Nate. Don't we have a song to play?" Bella simply replies nudging Nate's arm off of her shoulders as she takes several big steps away from him.

"Ah yes... That trip down memory lane... Our songs and duets oozing with sweet love and adoration for each other."

Bella just laughs out loud. "Yeah right.. Something like that" she replies sarcastically to Nate and his too-big boots, pressing a kiss to my cheek before she begins to walk off, preparing to play on the stage with the rest of the band and not even considering waiting for Nate to trail behind her.

* * *

><p>The band is a hit, just like they were in their hay day during our final year of high school. Seeing Bella onstage again reminded me of her radiant glow from performing with the band in the cafe five years back.<p>

However, towards the end of the performance, I had seen Zane going for yet another drink which I'd lost count of a few drinks ago. I called him a taxi and waited until I'd sent him off to our share house where it is either going to be a very good thing or a very bad thing for him to turn up drunk after Rikki had already left earlier in the night.

After sending Zane off, I immediately head back for the hall where the main event is being held and where I know Bella and Allie are somewhere.

Walking inside again as the evening is beginning to draw to a close I notice that the pop songs from earlier in the night are winding down to softer songs for slow dances in the time since I had been in the room. I search around the gym for the two girls I'm looking for among the slowly reducing population in the room.

Upon seeing Bella and Allie I don't hesitate in immediately walking over to my girls.

"Hey you. Where did you run off to? What teen crush have you been off

chasing?" my girlfriend teases as she sees me walking in her direction.

Instead I only answer to one of her questions that she has just posed to me, before trying to work out the state of our daughter who is in Bella's arms. "I went off to get an intoxicated Zane into a taxi home. I'm assuming Rikki told him about Kyle. Is our girl asleep?"

"Yeah. She conked out about fifteen minutes ago. The poor thing's exhausted. It's a pretty big night for a little girl."

Seeing the mother of my child holding our sleeping daughter brings a smile to my face. Allie's arms are slung around and attached to Bella's neck, with her head buried into her shoulder and holding a handful of Bella's dresses material in her palm out of comfort.

I slip my jacket off myself and hook it over Bella's shoulders so that it covers her arms as well as our child who lay asleep in between them.

"Thanks..." Bella smiles gratefully. I wrap my arms around her waist with our daughter sleeping soundly between our bodies as I begin slow dancing with my girlfriend since her last partner fell asleep on her.

Tonight has been an eye-opener of everything that has changed and everything that has stayed the same, or in my case right now, everything that has transpired, unexpectedly, to be better than I could ever have foretold.

In my final year of high school, I would never have foretold that I would become a father so soon, nor that I wouldn't continue some form of diving as a career that I had been working towards for the most part of my life. I would never have foretold either of those events, let alone the fact that I'd be so happy about it if either of those things were to happen as they have.

Even though I never sat down and predicted my future at 18 years of age, you do have a feeling, some sort of instinct and drive within you that subconsciously feels what is ahead of you.

Pondering our past and foretelling our future, I press a kiss to Bella's hair, my lips lingering as I let three words out. Two of which hold the potential to change our lives forever as I utter a question that I've pondered posing to the same girl more than once in the past.

"Bella? Marry me."

My girlfriend's reaction to my proposal is almost instantaneous as her face lights up... and she laughs. Out loud. "Sure, Will. Right here, right now?"

Laughter is generally not the desired response after a proposal.

I can feel my face screw up as I try to process the response and the laugh that I had not been expecting as one of the reactions and 'yes' or 'no' answers that I thought my question may receive.

I don't reply to Bella's light-hearted joke that had been made over the question that she had determined as humorous. Instead, Bella and I have a silent exchange of facial expressions as I try to convey and clarify the fact that I view the question I have just posed as anything other than lighthearted.

"Oh... That was a serious question... Wasn't it Will?"

I nod and Bella goes a shade of crimson that I never knew is possible, while she bites her lip uncomfortably. Faced with the prospect of a sinking ship if she rejects my question, along with the world of awkwardness that may go along with that, I cling to the window of hope and the fact that she hasn't declined my proposal. _Yet_.

"I know that you weren't expecting that and that there wasn't much lead into that question. We haven't even really discussed marriage at all this time around that we've been together. I probably should have had a better intro to that. But, tonight has just got me thinking. A lot. About the past, about the future. Where we've come from, how we got here and where we're headed. Getting engaged and married is what I want, Bella. I love _our_ girl and I love _my_ girl and I want us to be a complete, clickÃ© family... Husband, wife, kids, dog, house, white picket fence."

A smile spreads across my girlfriend's face, but I can see how closely she is analysing my question behind the scenes and in her mind.

"So, yeah, Bella... I meant it. I still mean it. _Will_ _you_ marry me?"

* * *

><p>BOOM! We have a marriage that is skating on thin ice and now we have the potential for another marriage. When there is just so much damage that has been done, what do you all think is going to happen for Zane & Rikki now that they have been reunited? And Bella? What is she going to say?

**I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I thought that it would be something a little bit different to portray all the happenings from the dudes perspectives so I hope that you liked it too. **

395 reviews for the next chapter!

Next chapter: Big things for everyone in the 1-2 chapters before the final! It's all about JUDGEMENT decisions. Cleo and Lewis get a surprise which brings on a decision, Rikki and Zane struggle which calls for another decision and finally Bella and Will deal with the aftermath of the proposal as she tries to make a decision.

29. Judgement Part 1

**Okay, before I get into this chapter, I want to just spend this authors note really, truly praising my reviewers. I have INCREDIBLY supportive reviewers. Honestly, it's truly remarkable how many people review each chapter for a starters, considering that H2O is such a small fandom. Not only do I have such loyal reviewers, but your

reviews are so frequently substantial and long. I really appreciate the depth that goes into you guys giving me feedback on my work.**

**P.S. I'm bursting with excitement for tomorrow. I am one half-day of work away from freedom since my work's closed over Xmas and New Years - woo! **

* * *

><p>Chapter Twenty Nine â€" Judgement

... PREVIOUSLY...

_"Bella? Marry me." _

_My girlfriend's reaction to my proposal is almost instantaneous as her face lights up... and she laughs. Out loud. "Sure. Right here, right now, Will? ... Oh. That was a serious question... Wasn't it Will?" _

_I nod. _

"I know that you weren't expecting that and that there wasn't much lead into that question. But, tonight has just got me thinking. A lot. About the past, about the future. Where we've come from, how we got here and where we're headed. Getting engaged and married is what I want, Bella. I love our girl I want to be a complete, clichÃ© family... Husband, wife, kids, dogs, house, white picket fence."

_A smile spreads across my girlfriends face, but I can see how closely she is analysing my question behind the scenes and in her mind after I'd finished explaining the method behind the madness that had triggered me asking the question. _

_"So, yeah, Bella... I meant it. I __**still**__ mean it. Will you marry me?"_

* * *

><p>judgeÂ·ment also **judgeÂ·ment****

>_n.

>**1. **The act or process of judging; the formation of an opinion after consideration or deliberation.

Bella's POV

"Yes. No... I don't know."

I helplessly watch on as I see my boyfriend's face light up, then his smile falls, before finally an expression of confusion just floods over Will's face while he reacts to my response with my mouth running as fast as my hazy decision making is.

To counteract my guilt over Will's rising and falling reactions with my indecision, I grab my free hand that isn't holding our sleeping daughter in my arms.

"Listen. I think I want that too, Will â€" it's where I see you and I headed, but I also think that that is the sort of question that we

should both sleep on and think over before we make a final decision and commit to an engagement."

I can see his hesitance and disapproval at my suggestion so I quickly try to add to my reasoning, trying to win Will over with my logic to buy me more time to be able to make one of the biggest decisions of my life.

"That way, if we think it over and we do decide to get engaged, then that's all well and good. However, if we get engaged in the heat of the moment, without really thinking it over then it's going to hurt our relationship if we get engaged when we don't want to be or haven't thought it through. Besides, it's been a big night. There's been lots of reminiscing and talking of the future and the past. If we get engaged when we haven't really thought about it then it could really hurt our relationship, but if we wake up tomorrow and think it's bad idea, then we'll wait. We'll forget about the proposal so it's not awkward or anything like that and then we'll revisit the idea at a later date when we are ready. On the flip side, if we both want it tomorrow, then my answer's a yes and we'll make it official."

Once again as I babble on, I try to ease my boyfriend's disappointment that I didn't jump at his big question, trying desperately hard to keep my heart on a leash while I let my head take the lead.

"Listen... Just because I want us to think it through, it doesn't mean that there is even the smallest doubt in my mind that I don't love you or that I don't want us to ever be engaged. We just need to make a rational decision about this for Allie's sake just as much for our own relationship."

Will nods, hesitantly as he gestures for me to hand him Allie in an exchange from my arms to his. I know that Allie's in his care tonight and I can only assume that his reaction to my pause on his proposal means that he wants to flee and leave the reunion, headed for home. I can't blame him and I just hope that the damage hasn't already been done.

"Alright... Well, give it some, uh, thought, I guess and then we'll take it from there. Goodnight Bella."

Will presses a kiss to my cheek before turning around and walking off with our daughter, promptly leaving the hall of the event without another word or goodbye to anyone else.

As I'm left alone with the weight of the question that Will has put on my shoulders out of love, I think about the fact that there is a huge part of me that had just wanted to say yes as soon as the question was asked. But very quickly, a self-defense mechanism had been awakened within me just minutes ago, as I remembered the first time that I had been engaged.

The first time it was to a man that I was more scared of than in love with and I know that just like I had said yes to Daniel for all the wrong reasons, I also know that Daniel had asked the same question as Will for all of the wrong reasons, completely unlike my current boyfriend.

Along with my remorse over my past relationship which had resulted in a brief engagement, I had made a promise to myself to never put myself in the same position again... To never be engaged just for the sake of saying yes.

While my heart is screaming out one answer, I can simultaneously feel my judgement holding me back at the same time...

* * *

><p>judgeÂ·ment also **judgeÂ·ment****
>_n.
>**2****. **The capacity to assess situations or circumstances and draw sound conclusions; good sense.

Rikki's POV

The following day, I walk downstairs to where Zane is half awake on the lounge, where he must have crashed the night before. Tam had mentioned to me how he had needed to be let inside after being sent here -drunk- in a taxi from the reunion, but I didn't bother coming downstairs at the time.

"Hey. Are we talking? Are we still married? Are we safe to be in the same room? Under 5 metres away from knives and other sharp kitchen appliances?"

Zane doesn't look amused by my attempt at humour, instead he sluggishly sits up and wipes the sleep and tiredness out of his drowsy eyes.

"I am so not awake enough to talk about this, Rik" Zane whinges while he tries to wake up.

I pick up and drop the Yellow Pages directory to the floor with a slap on the cold tiled floor. It's the first thing that comes into my view and then into my hands that I know will cause a loud enough slam to get my point that I'm about to give across to my husband. He immediately jolts from the unexpected noise.

"Well, wake the hell up Zane! I know that you're a coward and that you shut people out when it gets too hard, but you and I, we need to talk about this."

"Fine. Stay with me, divorce me, do what you want. I couldn't care less."

It's a lie. I know Zane well enough to know that he does care. It's because he cares that he shuts me and the rest out of his life as a coping mechanism for his insecurities when he cares too much. It's easier for him to put on a cold front and to desensitise himself from a situation than it is for him to get hurt, or to even risk exposing himself to that pain.

It's Zane's way of dealing and coping with fear. A defence mechanism.

He never wanted to let me see him in prison because he cared too much about how I'd see him and how I'd view him in there. For the same reason, that is why he says he 'couldn't care less' where and how

we end up and where we go from here. He wants himself not to care about how we end up because otherwise that care risks hurting him if we fall apart and away from each other.

"That's a lie, Zane. I know you care. You try not to because you don't want to get hurt, but you do care."

Silence. My husband doesn't bother responding and he doesn't even bother trying to dispute the statement which I'd clearly hit the nail on the head with. I know that a silence and no answer is the most that I am going to get from Zane and the closest I'll ever get to him telling me "_yes Rikki, you **are **right_."

"Why did you do it? Did you love him? ... _Do_ you love him?"

I don't need to clarify who the 'him' is in Zane's hard question.

"No. I don't love him, I never did. Sure, you could say Kyle and I had a bit of chemistry, but that doesn't mean anything, I have chemistry with Emma, with Lewis, but it was never a romantic spark. I think it was the closeness I had with Kyle that was my downfall... Lust. It's not an excuse, but with both you and Tam shutting me out of your life, I didn't feel like I had all that much left, especially when the Cleo and Lewis were absorbed with the pregnancy and Will and Bella were still establishing their relationship."

Zane stands up from the couch that he'd used as his bed the previous night since he'd groggily and drunkenly crashed there. I can sense his agitation and anger as he runs his hands through his short hair and as he paces around the lounge room that he hasn't occupied in the last six months during his stint in prison.

"What? So because your friends were happy and because Tam and I didn't let you look after us, you felt the need to jump into bed with your best friend's brother? Or was it revenge? Tit-for-tat? I hurt you, so you hurt me?"

"No, Zane. As much as I'm a loner and as much as I hate to admit, I'm just the same as everybody else. I needed somebody and I needed that bond of having someone. Someone to see through the _'I'm fines'_ and to force me to talk and vent after they can tell I've had a bad day... And unfortunately, when that person is supposed to be my husband, that person was Kyle and I made the mistake of not facing my feelings and letting it go too far."

Zane's face scrunches up tensely as he keeps his anger and frustration pent up, stopping himself from yelling at or hitting something or someone. His anger and his inability to manage it is one of the many reasons that we are in this situation at all.

"Damn it, Rikki! What the hell happened?! What happened to being so happy and so convinced that we could make a life together, that we'd be with each other for the rest of our lives?! That wasn't even a year ago, yet it almost feels like another lifetime ago."

I have no answer to the questions that have been on my mind for the last six months, the questions that have been revisiting me everyday since I did the deed with Kyle.

It turns out that apparently those exact same questions have been on Zane's mind too, not that I'd know anything else that has been. It's a little bit difficult to gauge my husband's perspective when this is only the second time I've seen him in almost six months.

"I don't know, Zane. I really don't know how we got to this. I just know that we both hurt each other and we both acted in ways that we shouldn't have. You shouldn't have pushed me away and I shouldn't have gotten so close to Kyle after bottling everything up. "

"Yeah, we both made mistakes - I know that much. But if you don't know how we got here, then do you know how to get out of this place and how to go from here? Or where we go from here?"

I sigh. Again, I don't know the answer to Zane's question, but what I do know is that the answer is going to call for a huge judgement decision and evaluation of myself, of Zane, of our marriage that is sitting in taters and what love we do have for each other.

It'll take an assessment -a judgement- of some hard truths to know if we have a chance, if we are even able to, or want to give our relationship a chance.

Within the next few days, Zane and I need to figure out a way to resolve whether or not we are prepared to make the commitment to keep working on spending the remainder of our lives together...

* * *

><p>judge^Â.ment also **judge^Â.ment***
>_n.
>**3. **The capacity to form an opinion by distinguishing and evaluating.

Cleo's POV

Motherhood isn't so much just caring for a baby. Rather, it is learning to care for a baby while multitasking and completing a ridiculous range of other tasks all at the same time.

So far, in the first month of my son's life I have got a handle on holding a baby while folding clothes and holding a baby while doing paperwork, but there is still a plethora of other skills that I have been working on developing.

In this particular instance, I am bouncing Link, trying to settle him while reading paperwork and working on taxes. I'm not sure how well I am fulfilling either of my tasks as my son continues to grizzle unhappily, fighting the slumber that I am trying to coerce him to, and the paperwork I am working on is making less and less sense while I forget where numbers are coming from just seconds after I record them down.

I'm further interrupted when I hear the opening of the front door and I try to guess which other occupant of the house it might be, while trying to remember everyone's schedules which is the biggest clue as to who it might be.

From where Link and I are sitting on the outdoor setting outside, it doesn't take long before Lewis finds us. He would have basically had

to immediately walk into the home and head straight out to the backyard to be able to reach us as quickly as he did.

"Hey. How was your day?" I ask my husband as he walks outside to where I'm holding Link and sitting on the outdoor setting that overlooks our family home's view of one of the many canals on the Gold Coast.

For such a nice spot, sitting outside in the warmth was something that is always severely taken for granted and rarely used. I'm actually surprised that he could locate us so quickly in one of the least used areas of the home. "How did you know where we were so quickly?"

Lewis just chuckles as he takes our baby that I had been holding from me, pressing a kiss to Link's thin and barely visible hair as he tries to rock and settle our son.

"Well, the grizzling baby noises was just a little bit of a giveaway."

"Right. I don't know what's frying my mind more - baby brain or taxes. Either way, I think I'm excused."

Lewis silently acknowledges me, but I can sense his attention is directed far more towards Lincoln as he continues bouncing him, attempting to settle him a little and to silence his cries.

"Has he been like this for long?"

I pause the number-crunching and look over towards my boys who almost look as uptight as each while one grizzles and the unsuccessfully tries to stop those grizzles.

"Yeah, pretty much. Kim's hairdryer woke him up from his morning nap and I think it spooked him a bit. He just hasn't settled much or for long at all since then."

"I might go up and see if he giving him a bath calms him down a bit."

So far and at this stage, Lincoln hasn't developed my marine traits, but that's not to say that it won't ever happen. I know that with Allie, she only developed her tail after she was several months old, followed by her powers that have been developing more recently.

Needless to say, Link isn't out of the woods just yet and every time Kim pleases to or snatches him away to give him a bath, I can't help but hold my breath out of fear.

"Go for it. I was hoping you'd say that when you got home."

Lewis walks off and returns inside without uttering another word. I continue the paperwork by crunching numbers, numbers and more numbers until there's a yell of my name within ten minutes later.

"Cleo! Hey Cleo... I think you better come up here for a minute!"

I can hear the urgency in my husband's voice, despite the fact that

distance as well as many walls between us stifle the noise of his call a little bit from where it sounds like he is bellowing out from me from up on the second storey of our home.

Hurrying inside and upstairs, it doesn't take long for me to locate my husband and son - a task made that is much easier by the frequent, raspy breathes that are audible from the hallway. As I proceed to enter the bathroom, Lewis's eyes are dilated as he gawks at the baby in the baby-bath who is as happy as can be splashing around in the shallow waters... with a tail.

My son is a _merman_. I always knew that there is a chance, that 50/50 flicker of possibility given that he would either be like Lewis or like me when it comes to the water. However, there is not really much that can prepare me, and Lewis by the looks of it too, for that moment of learning that well yes, he is very much like _me_.

"What are we going to do Cleo? It's one thing protecting you, but him... He can't defend or protect himself from avoiding water at all costs around the others. What are we going to do?"

Perhaps I'm making a bad judgement call and a rash decision, but my short evaluation process of our situation and of the innocent baby boy that is splashing delightedly with his shiny white tail calls for a quick judgement and action to be taken before Lincoln, Lewis and I are forced into a world of trouble if my family or anyone else for that matter - Kim's boyfriend, Sam's sister- find out about the secret I now share with my son.

"We can't stay here, Lewis. Not around my family and everyone else that comes with my family. It's too dangerous and way too easy for accidents to happen. I think we're going to have to move out."

While one judgement seems fit to remedy our current predicament, in the back of my mind I know that it is the same decision that Lewis and I had judged that we were ready for not long after our wedding all those years ago, the decision that pulled us into a deep hole of difficulty before we moved back home...

* * *

><p>TWO CHAPTERS LEFT! The next two chapters were all originally written as one but it got WAY too long, so now it is just a 3-part final.

Next chapter: Will & Bella, Rikki & Zane and Cleo & Lewis all make their judgement about their relationships/living arrangements... Any guesses? What about your thoughts?

**So close to 400 reviews! I'll update sometime soon after that! :)
**

30. Judgement Part 2

**First update of 2016! **

**Thank you so much to all of my lovely reviewers for their kind words on the next chapter. I love that you guys love the 'judgement' theme with different meanings of the word above each section of the

chapter. I just thought that it was something a little bit different to try with the closing chapters. Really, a lot of the content comes down to that one word over these chapters, too.**

**Also, a thank you in particular to the guest reviewer on the last chapter for your lovely, lovely review! I would normally thank you via PM but even though you didn't link an account I wanted to make sure I acknowledged it. **

Now, I mentioned that there is only two chapters remaining (one chapter after this) in the last update and most of you asked whether there will be a third Far From Perfection... YES. Yes, there is definitely going to be a third story and I am currently up to writing about chapter 18 of it.

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty " Judgement Part 2

... PREVIOUSLY...

"_Damn it Rikki! What the hell happened?! What happened to being so happy and so convinced that we could make a life together, that we'd be with each other for the rest of our lives?! That wasn't even a year ago, yet it almost feels like another lifetime ago." _

_"I don't know, Zane. I really don't know how we got to this. I just know that we both hurt each other and we both acted in ways that we shouldn't have. You shouldn't have pushed me away and I shouldn't have gotten so close to Kyle after bottling everything up. "

—

_"Yeah, we both made mistakes - I know that much. But if you don't know how we got here, then do you know how to get out of this place and how to go from here? Or where we go from here?" _

Within the next few days, Zane and I need to figure out a way to resolve whether or not we are prepared to make the commitment to keep working on spending the remainder of our lives together...

—.

—.

judgÂ.ment also **judgeÂ.ment****

>_n.

>**4****. **The capacity to assess situations or circumstances and draw sound conclusions; good sense..

Rikki's POV

Zane and I agreed that we need to make a decision and that we need to have a calm conversation without tempers and emotions boiling over which would undoubtedly have an impact on the discussion and even more so, the outcome.

We'd decided to give some time to think about what we are each feeling, what both of us want and whether or not we feel as though we are able to forgive each other. So Zane and I concluded to meet later

that day on neutral territory, at the beach, to face the tough truths of our marriage and to make the life changing judgement on whether or not it is too late and if too much damage has been done.

I'd given our predicament -my relationship and marriage to Zane- a lot of thought in that time, in fact I don't think that I've been able to get it off my mind since then. The only thing that I can be confident in knowing is that I want a conclusive decision either way. I know what I want and the outcome that I would love, but until I have talked to Zane, I know that I can't move on with my life or move on with trying to mend our relationship.

Zane's arrived there before me, not surprisingly. He's used to working like clockwork and knowing the importance of meeting for dead-on exact times with all the business meetings that he has arranged and attended over the years. Me on the other hand, I am my own clock and rarely will I be able to stick to times that I have committed myself to.

As I walk over to Zane, I take a seat on the sand beside him and don't bother with the small talk before I launch into discussing the purpose of our meeting, delivering my judgement of our relationship that I have spent much time considering lately.

"I think this is it for us, Zane. I don't think that you and I can work this one out."

I don't sugar-coat my statement and I try to focus on looking out on the water with my stone-fish exterior as Lewis so calls it. Although I concentrate my focus out on the water, from the corner of my eye, I can see Zane turn to face me from where he too had been looking out on the water.

"What? So you think that our marriage is over, just like that, end of story?"

I don't bother giving Zane an answer. It's too hard to even try to. But, Zane doesn't even wait for an answer before adding to his response, putting up a fight against the conclusion that I had come to.

"Listen Rikki. Sorry, but that doesn't sit well with me. I don't want you to be stuck in a marriage that you're not happy with or if you don't love me, but I don't know that I'm okay with that. Can we at least talk about it? Can you give it some thought, if you believe that there's even a tiny bit of hope for us. I know that I hurt you and even though you hurt me, I really do still love you. I would like to think that we can give us a shot after all this time and make it work. We're not the sort of people to just give in when the going gets tough."

My face lights up with a smile. Zane has just passed the test. I pull him in for a kiss that I can sense that he is puzzling over, considering I had just told him that I no longer wanted to be with him before I pull away and proceed to explain my reaction.

"Thank you Zane. I really do want that too, but I needed to know if you'd fight for me and for our marriage. I want us to sort it out, but I needed to know if you'd truly be in it and if you'd be able to try to initiate working on us" I explain as I give his hand a

squeeze. "I feel like I've spent months and months chasing after you and Tam, fighting to help you both. I needed someone to do that for me..."

"You know that it's not going to be easy, right? There's a lot of work to be done and a lot of damage needs to be undone."

I nod and Zane just pulls me closer to him as he holds me within his arms that are wrapped around my shoulder.

"Of course I know that. I know how far we are from being perfect, I know how far we are from even just being as happy as we were earlier in the year when we got married, but I also believe that we can do it. We can get back to that point, over time and with enough effort."

Zane gives me a small smile and a nod in agreement.

It's a little bit scary, not knowing if we are just prolonging the inevitable or if we are making the best decision, but we can only do our best to judge on what we know.

I know that I'm still hurt by husband's actions when he pushed me away and out of his life when we really needed to support each other through his sentencing. But, I'm also sure that I hurt him badly by cheating to a worse degree than he has ever reached in the past with Miriam or Sophie, while we were together in high school.

Whether Zane and I have made the best decision and the best judgement call is impossible to know, but the only thing that is in our control is our ability to do the best that we can and give our marriage the best shot and chance to work.

Eventually, judgement day will come. Whether it be in six weeks, in six months or in six years; but one day it will be proved whether or not we're able to make our marriage work...

* * *

><p>... PREVIOUSLY...<p>

_"Cleo! Hey Cleo... I think you better come up here for a minute!"

_

_Hurrying inside and upstairs, it doesn't take long for me to locate my husband and son - a task made that much easier by the frequent, raspy breathes that are audible from the hallway. As I proceed to enter the bathroom, Lewis's eyes are dilated as he gawks at the baby in the baby-bath who is as happy as can be splashing around in the shallow waters... with a tail. _

_"What are we going to do Cleo? It's one thing protecting you, but him... He can't defend or protect himself from avoiding water at all costs around the others. What are we going to do?" _

_"We can't stay here, Lewis. Not around my family and everyone else that comes with my family. It's too dangerous and way too easy for accidents to happen. I think we're going to have to move out."

_

While one judgement seems fit to remedy our current predicament, in the back of my mind I know that it is the same decision that Lewis and I had judged that we were ready for not long after our wedding all those years ago that pulled us into a deep hole of difficulty before we moved back home...

-. _

-. _

****judgÂ·ment** also **judgeÂ·ment******
>_n.
>****5. **An assertion of something believed.**

Cleo's POV

Lack of sleep is something that I have become accustomed to since the birth of Lincoln. However, once again last night, Lewis nor I had got much sleep, but, for the first time since our son's birth, it wasn't due to the sleeping patterns of the baby.

Last night we had really jumped on the idea of moving out and finding our own place, a judgement we'd made and first began to consider yesterday with the discovery of our son's merman physique that he'd inherited from none other than myself.

Speaking of the trigger of our plans to move out, Link, we've also had to manage our plans and set them into action around the little guy who's turned into our life's axis - everything revolves around him. While I'd feed or change him, Lewis would continue with crunching the numbers, or it would be Lewis whose settling him and I'd be examining every little detail of every potential listing on the local real estate web pages. That has been our entire cycle over this weekend.

While Lewis and I both knew that this day (just perhaps not so abruptly after Link's little surprise for us) would come and we both knew that living with my parent's in my family and childhood home until retirement was never going to happen, at the same time I don't think we're really prepared for having to set all of those changes into motion and risk what happened last time, again.

Currently, my son is fast asleep, as I'm expecting him to stay for at least another good hour or so. I'm trawling for apartments, units or small houses online and Lewis is basically reliving our last few months through the printed documentation and receipts; the evidence of how we've been living.

Suddenly a shiver, a bad feeling flushes over me and my stomach drops just a little. Suddenly, I feel the anxiety that I have become a little accustomed to feeling and thinking over regarding every little thing in life.

"Lewis. I don't know if we're making the right judgement... Maybe we could still stay here, making sure that one of us is always around Link if the others are home and if we make sure he's always away from water. That _could_ work."

My husband drops the pile of papers that he'd been analysing and note-taking about, looking for ways that we can cut our spending even

more as he is trying to readjust our budget with the potential expense of a place of our own being factored in.

"You know that's not going to work. You and I will be on edge for every second of every day if we stay here. We wouldn't even be able to walk out of the room and trust that we can leave the baby with the other's. You know it's hard enough to hide the fact that _you're_ a mermaid, but the secret will be out in a matter of weeks if we stay here. Link can't just pipe up and say _'sorry granddad, but can you not hold me because you've got a little bit of water on your hand'__. We won't be able to control water around him, Cleo."

I sigh. I don't even really need Lewis's explanation to rationalise the fact that, really, staying here isn't an option and its more than likely the worse judgement out of that or deciding to try and move out, but failing.

"I know that Lewis... But-"

Lewis cuts me off and grabs my hand, holding it within his. "But you're nervous about last time, aren't you, Cleo?"

I nod. My husband knows me just as well as I know myself. But better than understanding me, he understands how to make me feel better as he begins to prove himself as the logical one in our marriage, rationalising and reassuring me that we are capable of moving out and even more so, moving out and not rebounding right back to my childhood home with a massive debt within a few months all over again.

"Listen, I believe we can, Cleo. Look at us now from where we were 4 odd years ago. Think about how we've changed, how much we've grown up since then... Last time when we moved out and got ourselves into debt, we'd _just_ flown the coop, we'd _just_ got married and we couldn't manage our finances amongst those changes."

I give Lewis a nod in agreement, understanding what our circumstances were like back then as he continues to speak, building up my confidence in the judgement we're making that we need to move out,

"Right, so we weren't very prepared for moving out back then. But, since then, not only have we learnt how to save and make sure that we have money behind us to support us, but we've also been through my Guillain-Barré and we've had a baby. This, moving out and keeping in control of our expenses, that's nothing that we can't manage and pull through together."

Lewis's judgement of and his confidence in our abilities is reassuring. It's exactly what I need to hear among all of my own doubt in myself and in us as my fears keep diverting back to worse case scenario.

"Thanks Lewis. I really needed to hear that."

"Anytime" he smiles, pressing a kiss to my cheek before giving me a gentle nudge in my side "and see, it can start right here. I'm here for you. We're a team."

From that point, I know we're making the right decision. I know that

we've made the right judgement and that we're going to be able to see moving out through. I _believe_ we can. Lewis and I.

* * *

><p>... PREVIOUSLY ...<p>

"_Listen. I think I want that too, Will " it's where I see you and me headed, but I also think that that is the sort of question that we should both sleep on and think over it before we make a final decision and commit to an engagement."_

_I can see his hesitance and disapproval at my suggestion so I quickly try to add to my reasoning, trying to win Will over with my logic to buy me more time to make one of the biggest decisions of my life. _

"Just because I want us to think it through, it doesn't mean that there is even the smallest doubt in my mind that I don't love you or that I don't want us to ever be engaged. We need to make a rational decision about this for Allie's sake just as much for our own relationship."

While my heart is screaming out one answer, I can simultaneously feel my judgement holding me back at the same time...

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****judgÂ·ment** also **judgeÂ·ment******
>_n._

****6. **The mental ability to perceive and distinguish relationships; discernment.**

Bella's POV

Sitting there alone, after several hours alone with only my own thoughts, I am confident that I have made my choice... That I've made the _right_ judgement for my family.

I am waiting for my boyfriend and our daughter at a quiet, family-friendly eatery not too far from the share-house. Will had taken Allie overnight after the school reunion, where Will had spontaneously proposed to me.

The establishment overlooks some of the Gold Coast's maze of canals and is pretty quiet at present. We'd missed the breakfast rush and it is too early for the lunch one, but since Allie is a ridiculously early-riser, Will and I have both adapted our body clock to eating every meal about two hours earlier than we would have pre-kid.

Eventually, I see the tall blonde, followed closely behind our jabbering offspring who is deep in conversation. I notice that Will just acknowledges her every now and then to keep her satisfied of his role in the interaction.

"Hey" I greet as the two finally arrive at the table, pressing a kiss to the man's cheek and another to the little girl's golden locks.
"Have a good morning?"

I am expecting the usual sort of response from Allie, getting some comment about the smallest, most obscure part of her morning. Usually when asked the question she will tell you about her slice of toast for breakfast was too cold, or how the carpet tickles her toes, while her father would give me a more extensive recount of what the two has been up to over the day. However, today is a little different, with Allie focused on pursuing a different tangent, with Will's permission.

"Oh! Can we give it to mummy yet?! _Please_?!" Allie says, asking her father in a loud whisper, shaking at his sleeve to catch and keep his attention until she has an answer.

"Give _what_ to mummy yet?" I ask suspiciously, knowing I haven't seen my daughter this excited since the last Peppa Pig marathon aired on television.

Will contemplates our daughter's question momentarily before giving her the nod of approval. "Yeah, alright Allie..."

The four year old doesn't waste another moment, fearing that every passing second may cause her father's decision to sway and change from the '_yes_' of approval that she is after.

"I want to be a flower girl like Marnie at my Kindy was! She even got to wear a princess dress!" Allie demands as she takes the ring out of the _Colette Hayman_ bag that she has been toting since arriving.

She tugs at my hand and puts the silver ring on the first finger that it fits on with the big, blue and rectangle faux sapphire sitting in the centre of it.

Will tries to add to the conversation, giving me a little more background into why Allie is shoving rings onto my hand, proclaiming her desire to be a flower girl. He is quick, but not quite quick enough to speak _before_ I have a chance to express my annoyance at him for getting Allie's hopes up before I have even given him a conclusive decision and answer to the big question.

"You told her?! I haven't even said yes! You might as well start planning an engagement party while you're at it..." I banter with annoyance before Will extinguishes my irritation, clasping onto my hands as he looks earnestly into my eyes and explains the situation.

"Listen, I slept on it in last night. Spending the night to think about what you said and to think about proposing just cemented my decision to propose to you. I didn't say a word about it to Allie - I wasn't planning to in case you still say no. But, she heard me telling Zane about it this morning and she interpreted that as we _are_ getting married, so I had to explain it to her. So, since she knew I took Allie out shopping this morning. She helped me choose this one, but insisted that you'd like her ring more. So, we got both."

Any annoyance that I am harbouring at our daughter learning of the possibility and hoping that her parents would get married disintegrated by that point, even though I should have known Will's not the sort of person to make reckless or irrational decisions on a whim without thinking it through; which I guess could include proposing.

Another ring surfaces, in the center of a ring box, sandwiched stunningly. This particular ring is far more impressive than the first costume jewellery ring that probably has a recommended retail price of \$10.

Instead, the engagement ring in the box within my boyfriend's hands features an impressive floating diamond in the centre of the silver band, surrounded by a cluster of much smaller diamonds and sapphires either side of the central rock. I could describe the ring for an hour " the way every rock glistens from every angle, the beauty of the cluster of blue and white diamond, the unique look of the ring, yet the simplicity, anything. But, in one word, all I can is that the ring in front of me is overwhelmingly _beautiful_.

"Wow Will... It is a stunning ring..."

"Perhaps. But it's no good without a particular answer from you."

I look to Will who looks more nervous than I've seen him before. The nerves before his diving competitions and before we took our final end of year exams in high school that we thought would make or break our paths for the future at that time are nothing compared to Will's visible nerves in this moment.

I look to Allie who has a big, positive smile etched on her face, a smile that she got from her father whose own is far from present in his current state of nervousness. Despite my daughter's optimism and positivity, knowing my four year olds extent of knowledge, she probably doesn't even really understand what's going on and what impact my answer would have on her either way aside from the fact that she'd get to wear a princess dress and be a flower girl for a day.

I close my eyes and I briefly analyse the situation, quickly confirming my decision that I had made, thinking about all of the pros and cons I had weighed up for either option as well as the outcomes of the best case scenario and the worst case scenario.

My head, my heart and my pro/con lists only fall into step with what I feel and what my dreams have been for as long as I can remember.

Drifting to sleep, it was my dream that maybe one day I'd be able to give my unborn-at-the-time baby a happy, safe family that everyone deserves. A wedding ring and a marriage certificate don't guarantee that, not by any stretch of the imagination. But for me, it was my dream.

Ever since I was a little girl, I knew what I wanted out of life. I knew that I wanted to be a singer. I knew that I wanted two sons and two daughters. I knew that I wanted to marry the man who I loved just as much as he loved me back.

Along the way and since 7 year old Bella had outlined her life's dreams, I'd lost some of my dreams, but I'd found some that I didn't even know that I'd been longing for.

With the birth of Allie and as I changed my life and made the sacrifices I needed to welcome a baby into my lifestyle and as a single mother, that meant needing to live off of one measly, but stable wage and give up the unpredictable tips or payouts I'd receive with the band and along with that, any chances I'd had or progress that I'd made to becoming a singer.

But, along the way I'd found the beautiful opportunity that I'd never ever even dreamt of. The opportunity to be a mermaid along with my best friends and my daughter was the best dream that I'd never have dreamed of.

Now, I have the chance to make another of my dreams come true with the only person that I can imagine and have ever imagined myself doing so with.

... with Will.

I don't need the mental pro or con list to judge my love for Will, to distinguish our relationship and to discern my love for the man I don't really believe that I've ever stopped loving.

Instead, the decision that I had already made is only cemented even further.

"Yes" I finally release from my lips, my voice has an exasperation to it that either makes me sound like I've spent the last hour and a half on a marathon or that I hadn't bothered breathing for the last minute.

Will's face lights up, but before he moves another muscle, he examines my eyes briefly, waiting for the confirmation, that I am set in my decision, that a '_no_' and a '_I don't know_' aren't about to follow my initial answer, that he can truly rejoice with that fact and that he wouldn't receive three answers like he had last night.

"Yes, Will. It's _just_ a yes. I'd love to marry you" I beam, letting out a laugh of happiness as he finally reacts to my answer to his question. He too lets out a nervous laugh of relief, instantly wrapping me in a hug, collapsing into my hair with a sigh of relief. After a brief moment or two, no longer than it would take him to breathe in and inhale my locks, he moves abruptly again, pulling away to reach my lips as his latch onto mine in one hell of a kiss.

After we eventually pull away, beside us and on her best behaviour (kisses generally result in 'yucky!' or other exclamations of disgust in front of the four year old), Allie looks up at Will and I with patience and big eyes that glimmer full of hope.

"So do I get to wear a big, pretty princess dress like Marnie?"

"Yes sweetheart you will get to, one day" I laugh at my daughter and her innocence, how the most exciting part of her parent's engagement for her is the prospect of wearing a 'princess dress' as a flower girl.

Will scoops our daughter up into his arms to join our embrace. With an arm hooked around Will's waist, I use my free one to tuck a strand of her loose blond hair behind Allie's little ear as I stroke her back affectionately. "So are you happy about that Allie? Do you like that idea?"

"Yeah. When I go to sleep I like dreaming that my mummy and my daddy are the Prince and the Princess cause then we get to live happily ever after."

Happily ever after. It's funny how clear and easy it is to a four year old. For a twenty four year old, it isn't quite as clear cut when you lose the prospect of a happily ever after. But just because happily ever afters are non-existent when nothing's perfect, it doesn't mean that you can't be happy with your life, whether it's perfect or a happily ever after or not.

* * *

><p>So. The judgements have been made! But will they prove right or wrong? I'd really love your thoughts on Rikki and Zane's decision to fight for their marriage, Cleo and Lewis's decision to try and keep the mer-secret safe by moving out and Bella and Will's decision to get engaged!

Also, I rather spontaneously started another story called 'One Little Thing'. If you have any knowledge of the Home & Away fandom (especially if you love Kyle & Phoebe as much as I do) go give it a read!

415 reviews for the final chapter of Far From Perfection 2.

Thanks again to you beautiful people who read my work x

31. Judgement Part 3

Hello, hello! Welcome to the last 'real' chapter of Far From Perfection 2. There will be one more chapter that follows this, but that is essentially going to be a teaser with previews of what is to come.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter of FFP (you know who you are), especially if you're a guest reviewer and I didn't have the chance to thank you personally.

Anyway, the crazy thing is that I finished writing and finalised this chapter on the 19th of November 2014! 2014! Over a year ago! Because I have written these chapters so long ago, I've found that going back and editing chapters lately has been like reading my own story for the first time in a way which is quite a really, really bizarre experience! In fact, with a few of the smaller plots I'll be editing along and be like '_Oh right, I totally forgot that happens_'.

* * *

><p>Chapter Thirty One " Judgement Part

3

****judgÂ·ment** also **judgeÂ·ment******
>_n._

****7. Judgment** The Last Judgment.**

No One's POV

As the ten all pile tightly into the moon pool, each of them are bottling their own excitement and news to share with the others. As soon as they had done the polite thing and greeted each other, the girls headed straight for the water and for the first time five mermaids were all together, sharing the moon pool as one.

The size of the moon pool is put to the test with more bodies in the cave than usual, making for a close and cosy environment.

It doesn't take long before everyone settles, with Emma, Cleo, Rikki, Allie and Bella holding onto the sides of the cave's floor, where their partners or father are. With the girls sitting in the moon pool and the guys in their own little bubble as Lewis with Link, Zane, Will and Ash all interact and settle themselves as close to the water as they can comfortably manage.

While listening to and conversing with one another, each is bursting at the seams to spill their own news, without even really knowing that everyone else is holding onto exciting news too. It's a game of who will burst and spill their news first...

However, among the chatter, the smiles and the conversation, Rikki is the first crack with her news, very unsurprisingly.

"So! Guys, just letting you all know that dingbat and I have had a relationshipy talk and after he begged me, I decided that I'm going to be a super human and try to do the best I can to put up with him, so rest assured, your favourite couple hopefully won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

The blonde's audience reacts in two ways. The girls all erupt into awes of excitement, focusing on the news itself, rather than the way that it had been delivered in true Rikki fashion. In contrast, the men react to the way the news had been conveyed finding amusement in and laughing at the way Rikki had put it, before teasing Zane.

"Oh really? Not saying I'm not glad to hear it, but it wasn't at all obvious by the way you two were acting when you got home earlier, not to mention the hand holding and PDA's since we got here" Will laughs at two of his best friends, with the announcement of the news that he already knew and worked out for himself.

"Oh shush" Rikki hisses making sure that Will doesn't rain on her parade.

While Rikki is telling Will off, no one else notices as Lewis nudges Cleo, silently signalling if they should reveal their own news to their friends since Rikki began with getting the ball rolling.

"Well we've had an eventful week ourselves... The little guy gave us a bit of a surprise. It wasn't entirely unexpected, but still not

what we've been planning on."

Before explaining anymore and before explaining the fact that Lincoln's transformation meant that they're also house-hunting and planning to move out, Lewis hands their son over to his wife who held him in the water, waiting 30 seconds, the same length of time as with Allie, before the baby is surrounded by bubbles that slowly disappear and fade away to leave his little white tail remaining.

"Linky's just like me!" Allie instantly exclaims. The four year old had never really understood, nor had she ever really liked the fact that out of the mermaids she was the only one with a white tail in contrast to her mother's and friends.

Elsewhere in the cave, there is a silence as everyone else takes in the sight. Aside from Bella, Rikki, Cleo and Lewis, none of the others have ever seen a mer-newborn baby, even Will who'd only seen his own daughter as a mermaid from over the age of one.

While Lincoln's form takes Zane, Emma, Ash and Will's breathe away, Cleo and Lewis keep going and drop their second piece of news before the others have recovered from learning of the first.

"So since we can't really stay at my family's house or else we'll always be on edge over Link coming into contact with water around my family, Lewis and I have also decided to move out and find our own place again. We came across a two bedroom apartment that we're having a look at later in the week."

Again, there is a chorus of reactions to McCartney's happy news. Everyone's reactions, aside from one couple's who share a knowing smirk with each other.

Once the chatter dies down a little and once everyone has finished digesting and reacting to Cleo and Lewis's news that they've just shared with their closest friends, it is then the other couple's turn. They had been holding back their own plans while waiting for Cleo and Lewis to enjoy the moment and the reactions induced by their news.

Looking over to Ash who gives her a silent nod, Emma speaks up and reveals her and her boyfriend's own plans and private agenda that has been killing them keeping to themselves since having made the decision to implement their plans.

"Well... seeing as this is turning into a big kid's version of 'share and tell', we might as well let you know that you two might have a little bit of competition with the house-hunting... Ash and I have decided to move back to Australia."

"Really? I was counting the days till you guys were gone again" Zane instantly says, joking teasingly to forge his own path and response among the other cliché excitement.

"Oh that's so exciting! What made you guys decide to move back?" Cleo's squeals as she clutches her childhood friend. Cleo's statement and question on the other hand mirrors and reflects everyone else in the moon pool's excitement, in contrast to Zane's teases that only he would come up with.

This time Ash speaks up considering he isn't sure whether or not Emma is still able to breathe from how tightly one of her best friend's is hugging her in the well-meaning excitement.

"Well don't get us wrong, it's great living overseas and experiencing all of that, but it was something we started talking about when Rikki first called to invite Em to Cleo's baby shower. It's not the same living in a foreign country; you don't have the same roots and long-term connections with friends and family. It can be quite isolating in a different country, so since we've been back here, we've been looking for places."

"I have no problem with that" Rikki adds with a smile in response to her friend's partner explaining why they are planning to return to their homeland.

After the chaos begins to subside just a little as everyone's begins to come down from their excitement high's, it is all unknowingly interrupted by Lewis's joke.

"Alright... So let's get this straight. Zane and Rikki are staying together and seeing how many more years they can be together without killing each other; Cleo and I are moving out; Link's a little mer-fellow; Emma and Ash are moving back to the land down under... I think that makes it your turn Bella and Will. What bombshell are you two waiting to drop?"

Lewis's taunt is only meant to be translated as a tease after the pattern of conversation and the news-dropping trend, with the meet up in the moon pool rapidly turning more and more celebratory than anyone expected.

However, Rikki is the first to laugh wildly as she notes the look between the lovers who the spotlight is on now.

"Oh! Lewis is on the money! You two are hiding something too, aren't you?! What is it?! Tell us before I start making far-fetched assumptions!"

Again, Bella and Will share a look as their original plans to announce their engagement, at a later date are sidelined by Rikki's ability to read her housemate, her best friend and their body language between each other like a book. After a few silent glances and expressions, both ensure that they are okay with revealing their own news.

"Will proposed to me at the reunion... And eventually I said yes to him" Bella smiles, wishing she hadn't resisted the urge and temptation to wear her engagement ring (which would have been an instantaneous spoiler of their news) to enable her to show off her new jewellery along with the delivery of their news.

Another chorus of congratulations ring out through the cave as the newly engaged couple handle questions and comments ranging from Zane's jealousy that: 'You should have told me first_!' to Cleo's questions about every little tiny detail of the wedding that is as of yet, completely and entirely unplanned_.

While the eventful afternoon in the moon pool is a time of joy and celebration between the close friends, there is a tiny part of

everyone there that can't quite shake the enormity of the changes. While the change is proof of the progression in their lives, it is all still unknown as to whether each person is making the right judgement and choosing the right path upon reaching all of these crossroads.

That's the problem with judgements.

... Judgements.

They can come down to choosing a Caramello Koala over a Freddo Frog, because apparently everyone loves caramel.

But some judgements can be split second, endangering and even fatal... Whether to take off in that questionable break in the traffic or whether to hold your spot on the other side of the Give Way sign and wait it out while you watch the cars that could have collided with your own fly past you.

In the case of Bella, Rikki and Cleo, some changes are completely life changing too...

The judgement decision to decline a proposal or to accept a new piece of jewellery to mark the rest of your life. The judgement decision to give up that piece of jewellery, or to keep on trying, using it to remind you of the promise you made in the first place. The judgement decision to make another commitment, for the second time, with your family, taking that jump and leap of faith, with the hope that you are better prepared and able to make a success of the judgement; that you now are ready for that move and that step, to move out from your family home with your own family.

In the last five and a bit years; Cleo... Rikki... Bella... Emma... Lewis... Zane... Will... Allie... Tam... Dan... Kyle... everyone has made decisions and everyone has made judgements, both good and bad, both right and wrong.

The good judgements have resulted in Lewis returning home to Australia, judging that the love of your life is more important than pursuing a career and study in another continent; they led to Bella finally telling Will that they share a daughter; and Rikki's decision to silence her stubborn side, deciding to take the spare room in Will and Zane's bachelor pad all those years ago.

Bad judgements have led to Zane's arrest... the first and second time; Bella's bad judgement in a partner resulted in her abusive relationship with Daniel; and Rikki's affair where her bad judgement in failing to realise how close, too close, she and her feelings had been growing for Kyle, the man who wasn't her husband. Tam's bad judgement led to her downfall; failing to tell Rikki after wrongly feeling as though she had been shutting her out of her life and feeling that she should return the favour and keep her eating disorder to herself.

Right judgements are not always easy judgements to make. This is a lesson Bella learnt when she broke up with Will five years ago after the realisation that both she and Will had to grow individually, before they could continue to grow and flourish as a mature couple; something that they both see and appreciate since their rekindled and renewed relationship which has lead to their engagement. Cleo and

Lewis learnt this lesson also, when upon reaching financial strife, they made the difficult decision to boomerang back to Cleo's family home, humbly, after failing with their finances.

Wrong judgements are not always the malicious or intentional results, not like a bad or sinister judgement, but sometimes it's just a matter of making the wrong decision because you think its right, or because you can't handle the alternative. Will learnt that the hard way, resulting in losing out on a whole year of his daughter's life because he couldn't handle answering the phone or opening the door to his former girlfriend. Zane's wrong decision and his poor judgement in pushing Rikki away upon learning of his jail term meant learning that he'd unintentionally, but selfishly, made the wrong judgement; pushing his wife into the arms of another guy.

However, at the end of the day, it's the good, the bad and the ugly judgements and decisions that bring everyone to where they are and who they are in life.

Life is full of judgements. Some are perfect, while others are far from that. As for whether they are the right judgement or the wrong judgement, sometimes you've just got to ride your judgement out and see it through.

The end.

* * *

><p>Well that is Far From Perfection 2 over and out. I really wanted to post this before I go overseas first thing tomorrow morning.

****Over the next couple of weeks, I will be posting different little snippets and sneak peeks like upcoming previews, a trailer on YouTube, etc for Far From Perfection 3.****

****I SO can't wait for you to see what is waiting for you and our favourite characters in the third (and most likely final) installment of Far From Perfection. Watch this space for more!****

32. FFP 3 Sneak Peek Video Trailer

****FAR FROM PERFECTION 3: THE ROADS TO RECOVERY****

****...****

****WHAT'S TO COME?****

****...****

What tragic secret has one girl been hiding since her childhood, even from her partner?

Who has kept the existence of their son a secret, up till now?

What leads to the breakup of one couple and the breakdown of one character?

Who is in the fight for their life?

How will a job opportunity turn one couple's world upside down?

What about when one, or maybe two, pregnancies are added to the mix?

...

* * *

><p>...

****PREVIEWS****

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Just because something looks good, it does not mean that it is good. This is known by each of them as they question the integrity of one another's seeming happiness. All the while, they are questioning their own...

. . .

Life isn't fair. Not only is life not fair, it's just downright cruel. The injustice of it all has been eating away at him, his guilt festering.

. . .

"_Our child was in hospital?! And you didn't think to mention anything about that to me?!"_

. . .

"You didn't have to be strong through thatâ€¦ I hate the thought of you going through that on your own; suffering on your own. You should have let us help you."

. . .

"_Bels... Can that wait for a bit? I need to have a serious conversation with you, first. There's something I need you to know."_ And in that moment, Will Benjamin learns exactly what it feels like to turn someone's _entire_ world upside down.

. . .

The silence that follows one of Cleo's sharpest statements she's ever uttered in her life leaves Cleo to regret her words and leaves Lewis to worry that despite her words and despite her assurances, maybe everything isn't okay with Cleo.

. . .

If it wasn't for the seriousness, the heartbreak, in her sister's eyes Rikki would have just passed off the shocking statement as a joke from Tam. However, despite how serious Rikki believes her sister is and despite how solemn the mood is between the two, Rikki cannot do anything but stammer, trying to find words to express her shock, her confusion and her total, absolute puzzlement.

. . .

As he sits there playing happy families, his mind is elsewhere, being plagued with guilt after the mention of his former best friend after all these years...

. . .

He can see the heartbreak in her eyes as she blankly looks ahead for several minutes. He doesn't push, he doesn't say a word. Instead, he tries to draw closer to her which instantly makes her escape from her thoughts, returning her to the room where she's just been dealt the blow.

. . .

Within the last few sentences, they both had done what they do best to deal with being hurt; they hurt the other person right back. All the while, the damage and debris from the nasty words brings the issue and their relationship from bad to worse.

. . .

Even though there are a lot of factors in question at the moment, one thing that isn't is his need to support his wife, regardless. He's still got a lot of making up to do in that department.

. . .

Beside her, he looks a little lost too. He's never seen her like this. He's never seen his happy-go-lucky partner facing this much grief, so uncontrollably. All of it is new and unexpected to him. He didn't quite believe that she has been coping, but he had no idea that it has been eating away at her so significantly.

. . .

And just like that, Rikki, Zane and their marriage are all the way back at square one, all over again...

. . .

Looking into his eyes, even as they stand metres apart, she knows whatever he has to say next, whatever impact those words will have, she already knows that she will not like it.

. . .

There is no going back now. There is no way to un-hear it and there is no ideal option.

* * *

><p>...

FFP 3 VIDEO TRAILER

...

I also wanted to let you all know that the **video trailer for Far From Perfection 3** is up on YouTube now! I am so proud to be able to share it with you all at last, since I began working on it just over a year ago!

How to watch it? If you are subscribed to me on YouTube (pat on the back, ha ha) then it should automatically show up in your subscriptions page. However if you don't/don't have a YouTube then search 'Far From Perfection 3 Story Trailer' on YouTube and it should be the first option.

So give it a watch and a guess if you want more of a preview of my new story!

* * *

><p>And that is the preview! Every quote is an excerpt from here there and everywhere in Far From Perfection 3. In fact, some are from chapters 1920 that I only wrote in the last week. ****I left a few names in there to give a few clues, but I did make small modifications to make some quotes more ambiguous and just replaced some names with he/she/them/it.**

I've still got to sort out a cover for the next story somehow since I don't have a decent photo editor currently. I'm also thinking about uploading more specific previews for each character's issues but I'm not too sure whether I will do that or not. Is that something that would interest you guys?

I would LOVE to hear your predictions as to what will happen and what you think is being alluded to. Also, what you would like to see! I've only got about 10 chapters left to write, but I might be able to squeeze ideas or anything you want to see in there somewhere!

Also, would you like me to try and post a direct link for the video, if FanFiction will let me?

End
file.